

Le Corps et L'Esprit

in French Cultural Production



Paroles Gelées

UCLA French Studies

Special Issue
Volume 17.2 1999

*Selected Proceedings from
UCLA French Graduate Students'
Fourth Annual Interdisciplinary Conference*

Le Corps et L'Esprit in French Cultural Production

Selected Proceedings from
The UCLA French Department Graduate Students'
Fourth Annual Interdisciplinary Conference
April 16–18, 1999

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais,
Le Quart Livre

Paroles Gelées
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Toril Moi inspired the theme of the UCLA French Graduate Students' Fourth Annual Interdisciplinary Conference. Her pioneering work on Simone de Beauvoir encouraged us to question the relationship between body and mind as a site of continual ideological and aesthetic conflict. Our conference, *Le Corps et L'Esprit in French Cultural Production*, opened the door to a fascinating exploration of the interaction of body and mind in texts from the Middle Ages to the present day. The three-day event incited stimulating discussions that touched upon the most prominent developments in recent scholarship. We are pleased to have the opportunity to publish a selection of these outstanding papers in this special edition of *Paroles Gelées*.

Toril Moi's timely keynote lecture offered a fresh interpretation of "What is a woman?" on the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe*. Her inspiring address induced the thoughtful and personal responses of Lynn Hunt and Malina Stefanovska. We wish to extend to them a very special thank you for helping shape the intellectual atmosphere of this dynamic conference. We are grateful for their contributions to this volume.

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Finally, we wish to thank UCLA's French graduate students who joined together to make this annual event an overwhelming success. Their dedication to building a tradition of first-class forums for intellectual exchange has remained unwavering. We now eagerly await the conferences of the new millennium.

Vanessa H. Arnaud
Conference Chair and Editor

“I AM A WOMAN”: THE BODY AS BACKGROUND IN *THE SECOND SEX*

Toril Moi is Professor of Literature and Romance Studies at Duke University

The third paragraph of *The Second Sex*, covering only two pages in the French text, is a landmark in feminist thought.¹ At the beginning Beauvoir starts by declaring “I am a woman,” at the end she affirms for the first time that woman is the Other. How does she get from a declaration about herself to a general claim about all women? And in what way do these claims answer the question about what a woman is? This is how she begins:

The very act of stating the problem at once suggests to me a first answer.² It is significant that I raise it. A man would never think of writing a book on the specific [*singulière*] situation of males in the human race.³ But if I want to define myself, I must first of all declare: “I am a woman”; this truth is the background from which all further claims will stand out [*cette vérité constitue le fond sur lequel s’enlèvera toute autre affirmation*].⁴ A man never begins by affirming that he is [*par se poser comme*] an individual of a certain sex: that he is a man goes without saying. (SS xxi; DSa 14)

Some feminist theorists would probably feel that Beauvoir here turns her back on the real problem. Perhaps, they might say, she unconsciously realizes that the very fact of uttering the question “What is a woman?” is to condemn oneself to metaphysical essentialism. Since she does not wish to take up an essentialist position, the argument might go, she abandons the terrain of

theory for that of autobiography: confession takes the place of analysis. This is why, they might say, Beauvoir never succeeds in *theorizing* sexual difference, as opposed to simply gathering more or less positivist information about it. Needless to say, I think this is to leap to conclusions, and fairly predictable conclusions at that. I want to suggest instead that if we allow ourselves to be patient with this passage, it will emerge as the cornerstone of a truly original effort to think beyond the narrow choice between theory and autobiography, beyond the dichotomy between the first and the third person that irks so many contemporary critics, and, not least, beyond the opposition between essentialism and nominalism.

This passage is offered as a response to the question "What is a woman?" The first thing Beauvoir does is to investigate the speech act of the original question. Who is likely to ask what a woman is? In what situation would they ask such a question? Her first discovery is that sexual difference manifests itself in her very interest in the question. (She has, after all, just declared that it is enough to go for a walk with one's eyes open to discover that men and women have different interests.) The composition of the passage is strikingly symmetrical. Twice a statement about herself is countered by a sentence about what a man would do or say (*I* raise the question; *a man* would never ask; *I* must declare; *a man* never begins). The structure produces a strong contrast: not, as one might have expected, between "woman" and "man," but between "I" and "man."

Beauvoir here realizes that she is writing in a situation where, unlike male writers, she is forced to define herself as a sexed being; where she has no choice but to fill the empty shifter "I" with her sexual difference. The first "I" in the book ("I have hesitated for a long time to write a book on woman") was casual. It took itself for granted, without any philosophical ado. This "I" ("I am a woman"; "I must define myself," etc.) is showing signs of political and philosophical tension. In this sentence the idea that woman is the Other is already close. "But if I want to define myself, I must first of all declare: 'I am a woman'; this truth is the background from which all further claims will stand out [*cette vérité constitue le fond sur lequel s'enlèvera toute autre affirmation*]."

The language here is crucial. In French *s'enlever sur un fond* is a somewhat unusual turn of phrase, particularly in this context. *Se détacher* would have been the more obvious choice, since *Le Petit Robert* defines it as “to appear clearly as if standing out against a background.” In general, *détacher* always has connotations of visual separation, clarity, clear-cut contours, and so is often used about a color or shape set off against a different background color of some sort. If Beauvoir chooses to write *s'enlever* and not *se détacher*, it is presumably because she wishes to bring out a different nuance. Many of the most common meanings of *enlever* are obviously unsuitable for the context: Beauvoir does not appear to be thinking of kidnapping and ravishing, of stain-removing, or of something being taken away. One of the primary meanings of *enlever*, however, is “to lift upwards” (*en* + *lever*), and so *enlevure* has come to be a technical term for sculptural relief. In English “relief” may be used about visual as well as tactile effects (relief maps use colors and shading to indicate elevations and depressions); in French, however, *enlevure* is always tactile; an *enlevure* is something I should be able to feel in the dark. I do not mean to exaggerate the differences between these words: sculptural relief is visible too, and if I am in a landscape I could touch the church in the foreground as well as the trees in the background, yet the different sensory emphasis of these two words is obvious.

The image Beauvoir has in mind is now available. The fact that she is a woman is the truth which constitutes the background from which all further claims will stand out in relief, she writes. There are two facts here: first, it is a fact that she is a woman, second, it is a fact that whenever she wants to define herself, she is obliged to draw attention to the first fact. Beauvoir considers the fact of being a woman as the background against which the woman’s speech acts stand out. The word “claim” or “assertion” (*affirmation*) indicates that she is speaking about her own intellectual undertaking: to write a book about women. Like all other acts, my speech acts define me, an existentialist would say. If I am a woman, my claims are inevitably going to be taken to stand out from the background of my sex. This means that, however hard I try to define myself through what I am saying and doing

(through my self-assertions), my interlocutors will try to reduce my assertions to my sex. My struggle for existence will be met by their insistence on essence. I take Beauvoir to experience a sense of consternation at this discovery, to strongly wish for things to be otherwise.

There is a further complication in the sentence. In French, the verb is in the simple future tense (*s'enlèvera*). The published English translation uses the word *must*: “on this truth must be based all further discussion,” Parshley writes. This could give the impression that Beauvoir thinks that this is a desirable state of affairs, perhaps even that she thinks that the fact of being a woman always *ought* or *should* be taken into account. But Parshley here overlooks some common nuances of the French future tense. “Tu ne sortiras pas” usually carries connotations such as “you are not allowed to go out,” or “I predict that you will not manage to get yourself out of the house.” There is often a nuance of command, i.e. of being subjected to someone else’s power, or of inescapable destiny (“under no circumstances will you be able to escape this fate”). Beauvoir is not in fact saying that the background of sex *must* be kept in mind whenever a woman speaks, nor is she saying that it *ought* to be or *should* be kept in mind: she is saying that it *will* be kept in mind whether the woman likes it or not, and whether it is relevant or irrelevant to whatever she is asserting. In other words, the meaning of the sentence is that whenever a woman speaks, there is no way the fact of her sex is *not* going to be taken into account.

This is contrasted to the situation of human males, who will not automatically be taken to speak against the background of a sexed-male-body whenever they open their mouths. As Nancy Bauer has shown, just by saying that she is a woman, Beauvoir indicates that she rejects the Cartesian body/mind split:

It turns out . . . that the first thing Beauvoir has to say about herself is that she is a woman. This means that unlike Descartes Beauvoir begins with a fundamental investment in the significance of her body, so that her thinking will not be able to accommodate a Cartesian mind-body split. Furthermore, since her inquiry is rooted

in a sense of herself as being an instance of the generic concept “woman” a certain Cartesian threat of solipsism is avoided from the start: to call herself a woman is to start with the idea that other beings like her exist—that is, other beings who are called, or call themselves, women. (60)

Beauvoir writes: “A man never begins by affirming that he is an individual of a certain sex; that he is a man goes without saying.” What is being begun here is a piece of writing, most probably a philosophical essay. Beauvoir is claiming that because she is a woman and not a man everything she says (“asserts” or “claims”) in *The Second Sex* is going to be related to the fact that she has a female body. The reception of her book in France certainly proved her point.⁵

But there is more. For Beauvoir’s sentence “But if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say: ‘I am a woman’; this truth is the background from which all further claims will stand out,” sets up a strong intertextual link to a passage in the preface to Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*:

Perception is not the science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background [*fond*] from which all acts stand out [*se détachent*], and is presupposed by them. The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perception. (x-xi)

Merleau-Ponty writes this in a context where he wants to explain that the body gives us our perceptions, and that without perceptions there is no world. The body is at once what we are and the medium through which we are able to have a world. Speaking of bodily perception Merleau-Ponty uses the same imagery of foreground and background as Beauvoir when she speaks of the fact of having a female body. For Merleau-Ponty the body is the necessary background for everything I do, and everything I do has the perceiving body as its obvious presupposition. This background is something like a general (not particular or indi-

vidualized) condition enabling human agency and subjectivity to come into being. By speaking of background and foreground Merleau-Ponty means to warn against scientific or positivist reductionism. A background is not the meaning or essence of whatever takes place in the foreground: the natural processes of the body cannot in themselves explain the acts and thoughts of human beings. On the other hand, the specific background that the body is cannot be thought away or denied, or presumed to have no effects on the foreground. Against Kantian idealism and scientific positivism, Merleau-Ponty sets phenomenological materialism, one might say.⁶

To consider the body as a background is to allow that its importance for our projects and sense of identity is variable. Merleau-Ponty's visual metaphor (*se détacher*) makes me think of theater and of landscapes. In a play, the background—the backdrop—is sometimes crucial to the understanding of the actors' words and gestures, whereas at other times a relentless focus on the background would be quite misplaced. Let us imagine a building placed against a dramatic landscape. If it is the building I wish to study, the landscape is a simple background to which I need pay no attention at all. If it is the landscape, however, the building may either be considered as a part of it, or be disregarded. The background is always there, but its meaning is far from given.

Beauvoir's tactile metaphor has slightly different connotations. The relief on a sculpture may be admired for its own sake, but it is usually quite difficult to focus on the relief without paying any attention to the sculpture it is a part of. The case of the sculpture produces a more integral unity between foreground and background than the case of the backdrop on a stage or the landscape behind an Italian church. The difference in metaphors signals a difference in emphasis. Choosing *s'enlever* rather than *se détacher*, Beauvoir deliberately uses an image that makes it somewhat more difficult to focus on the foreground without taking the background into account than Merleau-Ponty's *se détacher*. Her metaphor takes sexism into account; Merleau-Ponty's does not. By seeing the sexed body as a background which the woman is *obliged* to foreground whenever she is asked

to define herself, Beauvoir indicates that for a woman living under patriarchy, the body is a far more inescapable fact than it is for a man. Whatever the woman says, she will have her body—her female sex—taken into account. We should note that this may or may not be what the woman wants. By thinking in terms of foreground and background Beauvoir avoids implying that women's words can be reduced to their bodies.

Elsewhere I discuss Beauvoir's understanding of the body as a situation, as a fundamental part of lived experience.⁷ What is the difference between the body understood as a situation and the body understood as background? In Beauvoir's sentence, the body considered as a background is represented as a body perceived by the Other. The presence of the Other is implied in the attempt to define oneself (one rarely finds it necessary to declare "I am a woman" to oneself), and it is explicitly there in the claim that this act of definition is the result of submission to an external obligation. The concept of situation also presupposes that there are others in the world and that we interact with them. But it is not a concept that applies exclusively to the body. The body is a situation, but so is the fact of going to high school, or being married. The body as a situation is the body as experienced by the human subject, the body as interwoven with the projects of that subject. Perceived as a general background for my existence, on the other hand, the body precedes and enables perception and experience. While the body as situation presupposes agency in the subject, the body as background enables such agency to come into being. At least this is the impression I get from reading Merleau-Ponty. It seems to me that Beauvoir in this sentence uses the idea of the body as a background a little differently, that she quite consciously chooses to imagine the acting and situated body as a background. This becomes quite clear when she goes on to discuss the "assertions" coming from the woman involved in an abstract discussion with a man. The actual, physical female body sitting there at the café table discussing philosophy is both a situation for the woman who is talking, and a background to her words for the man who is talking to her.

The same expression—to stand out in relief from a background—also turns up in the introduction to the second volume

of *The Second Sex*, entitled “L’expérience vécue” (“Lived Experience”). In this brief text Beauvoir writes that women are starting to assert their independence. This does not happen without difficulty, however, for “virile prestige” is far from extinct. In order to understand what it means to modern women to assert their independence, it is important to study “women’s traditional destiny.” Then she finishes the introduction as follows:

I shall seek to describe how woman learns her condition, how she experiences it, in what kind of universe she is confined, what forms of escape she is allowed to have. Only then will we understand what problems arise for women who, inheriting a heavy past, strive to forge a new future. When I use the words “woman,” “feminine” or “female,”⁸ I evidently refer to no archetype, no changeless essence; after most of my claims [*mes affirmations*] the reader should understand “in the present state of education and custom.” The point here is not to proclaim eternal truths, but rather to describe the common background [*fond*] from which every particular female existence stands out [*sur lequel s’enlève toute existence féminine singulière*].⁹ (SS xxxvi; DSb 9)

The second volume of *The Second Sex* is divided into four main sections entitled “Formation,” “Situation,” “Justifications,” and “Towards Liberation.” This volume has given rise to much criticism, usually on the grounds that Beauvoir generalizes from an unrepresentative sample, that she takes the French experiences of her mother’s generation and those of her own to be representative of women everywhere. It is also often assumed that she thinks that the situations she describes are such that no woman can transcend them. Thus her critique of motherhood or bourgeois marriage is often taken to mean that no individual woman could ever realize herself as an authentically free person within these institutions. If this were the case, Beauvoir would be an extreme determinist. On the other hand it has also been assumed that Beauvoir is a radical voluntarist, an idealist who thinks that women, just by an act of will, can throw off the sexist yoke and realize themselves, that they have only themselves to blame if

they fail to rid themselves of their bad faith. If this were the case, Beauvoir would have no reason to claim that institutions and ideology ("myths") oppress women.

The play between foreground and background proposed by Beauvoir avoids reductionism and essentialism (the individual woman in the foreground cannot be reduced to the general historical situation which is her background) while still enabling us to grasp the historical factors that influence and shape the choices of individual women. In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir tries to produce a historical analysis of women's condition. A historical analysis cannot be all-inclusive or universal in the sense of reaching a level of abstraction that might hold for all women in all countries at all times. In order to have any analytic and historical power at all it needs to be specific and particular. Even if we think that Beauvoir is wrong to deal with women "in the present state of education and custom [in France]," all we could do to correct her would be to propose that she deal with some other group instead. Since no such group is going to be more or less universal than any other, this would not make the analysis more or less representative of women's condition than the one Beauvoir proposes.

Beauvoir does not attempt to describe or predict what any individual woman will make of the conditions in which she is brought up. Her own life was extremely unusual for a woman in mid-century France, yet she fully believed that it was informed and shaped by the traditional background she describes in *The Second Sex*. Describing her discovery of patriarchal mythology, she writes: "it was a revelation to me: this world was a masculine world, my childhood had been nourished by myths forged by men, and I hadn't reacted to them in at all the same way I should have done if I had been a boy" (FC 103; FCa 136). Beauvoir's fundamental understanding of subjectivity is based on the assumption that we continuously make something of what the world makes of us. The "background" she is describing and analyzing in the second volume of *The Second Sex* tells us what the world wants to make of women. She also includes many case studies and innumerable examples in which she shows what women, responding to this situation, make of what the world

makes of them. The very fact that Beauvoir quite often dwells on exceptional women demonstrates that she does not take her description of the general historical and social background to be invalidated when she moves the focus to a specific case in the foreground, however exceptional it might be.

Finally, Beauvoir's sentence—"this truth is the background ..."—allows for two different political interpretations. On the one hand, she may be taken to mean that in a sexist society (such as Paris in 1949) a woman's claims will always be heard with reference to her body, but that in a non-sexist society this will no longer be the case. On the other hand, however, she may be saying that although sexism insists on reading a woman's books against the background of her sex, in a non-sexist society the same thing will happen to men as well. Here, in a nutshell, we find encapsulated the feminist conflict between a certain understanding of equality and a certain understanding of difference. Is Beauvoir saying that the aim of feminism is to make sexual difference irrelevant, that we should all be treated just as the human beings we are? Or is she saying that the aim of feminism is to show that sexual difference is relevant at all times and in every social and personal situation?¹⁰

First, it is crucial to note that Beauvoir's sentence refuses to embrace either interpretation. There is no sign that what she *really* means is one or the other. Second, it appears that neither interpretation corresponds to the logic of Beauvoir's text. For the first interpretation (that sexual difference is irrelevant) sounds like an echo of the humanist nominalism she explicitly rejected just one page earlier: "Clearly, no woman can without bad faith pretend to be situated beyond her sex." The second interpretation (that sexual difference is always of fundamental importance) is no more convincing, for it makes sexual difference appear absolute (or essential) by assuming that there can be no situation in which it is *not* a significant factor, and this is a view that clashes with the existentialist belief that existence precedes essence.

By thinking of the body as a background, Beauvoir avoids both interpretations. To say that the sexed body is the inevitable background for all our acts, is at once to claim that it is always a *potential* source of meaning, and to *deny* that it always holds the

key to the meaning of a woman's acts. Sculptural relief cannot always be understood by referring it back to the surface from which it stands out. Sometimes we need to understand the relief itself; at other times we want to consider how the relief affects the sculpture as a whole, and vice versa. In yet other cases, we want to see the whole sculpture as part of some larger context. In short, the sex of a body is always there, but it is not always the most important fact about that body. The dying body or the body in pain is not necessarily grasped primarily in terms of sexual difference. If I am trying to learn Chinese, this is evidently an act that I undertake on the background of my sexed body, but the relevance of saying so is not always obvious. If, on the other hand, I am trying to get pregnant, this is a project that certainly foregrounds my sexed body. More complex cases will arise from women's participation in different sports, or in other physical activities.

It follows from Beauvoir's analysis that in some situations the fact of sex will be less important than the fact of class or race; in other situations it will not. There can be no question of giving *one* of these factors general, overarching priority. The old debates about whether class-based exploitation or sex-based oppression are "primary," never yielded a convincing answer. They were in fact doomed to failure precisely because they sought a general answer, one that would establish the correct hierarchy of oppressions once and for all. One does not get out of this problem, incidentally, by denying that there are hierarchies of oppression. In Spain in 1936, for example, it was more important for Republicans of both sexes to fight against fascism than against sexism (this is not to say that the Spanish Republicans were not sexist). In other cases there may be no hierarchy: fighting for women's right to education may be as useful for socialism as it is for feminism. In yet other cases, sex will be the dominant form of oppression, hierarchically more important than class-based oppression. This is surely the case in Afghanistan, where women without male family members die because the Taliban will not allow them to see a doctor without a brother or a husband present.

I take Beauvoir to be saying that women's oppression consists in the compulsory foregrounding of the female body at all times, whether it is relevant or irrelevant to the task at hand. But sexism also consists in preventing women from foregrounding the female body when they want it to be significant. (A Beauvoirean feminist would be critical of anti-sex and anti-pornography feminism.) In a scene of flirtation or seduction, for example, a woman may want to foreground her body. Thus Françoise in *L'invitée* (*She Came to Stay*) intensely wants Gerbert to notice her sexed body, to notice her as a woman. On the other hand, it can be annoying and painful to be interpellated as a sexed body when one is immersed in a project that has nothing to do with one's sex. The same logic holds for the raced body. To be cast as a representative of one's race when one is immersed in a project in which this is an entirely irrelevant element, can be deeply painful and humiliating. A cartoon that appeared in the *New Yorker* is a perfect illustration of the point:



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Frantz Fanon brilliantly captures the sense of fragmentation and dislocation that arises from the experience of being reduced to one's raced body against one's will. In a passage in *Black Skin, White Masks* he describes walking down the street in a French city, passing a white woman and her little daughter on his way. I quote the scene at length because it so perfectly conveys Fanon's pain and alienation, his sense that the gaze of the white man im-

prisons him in his subjectivity, a subjectivity that is reduced to the fact of his black skin:

“Look, a Negro!” It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile.

“Look, a Negro!” It was true. It amused me.

“Look, a Negro!” The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement.

“Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!” Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible.

[. . .]

I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: “Sho’ good eatin’.

On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? But I did not want this revision, this thematization. All I wanted was to be a man among other men. I wanted to come lithe and young into a world that was ours and to help to build it together. (112–13)

There are situations in which we freely choose to be recognized as sexed or raced bodies, where that recognition is exactly what we need and want. Identity politics starts with such identity-affirming situations, but unfortunately goes on to base a general politics on them, thus forgetting that there are other situations in which we do not want to be defined by our sexed and raced bodies, situations in which we wish that body to be no

more than the insignificant background to our main activity. As we are about to see, Beauvoir herself gives a marvelous example of just such a situation when she discusses the case of an abstract conversation where a man says to her: "you say that because you are a woman." Although this experience may be far less painful for the intellectual woman than the experience of racism was for Fanon, the juxtaposition of the two situations reveal that similar mechanisms of oppression are at work in the encounter between the raced and the sexed body and the Other.¹¹

I am tempted to say: in certain situations I want to be considered as an intellectual, and not as an intellectual woman. Yet I do not say it. For this statement is not exactly right. I now realize that there is something in our language that makes it exceptionally hard to express what I do wish to say. It is far too easy to take my original impulse (to call myself an intellectual, rather than an intellectual woman) to mean that in some situations I wish to *deny* that I am a woman, and so to accuse me of being one of the humanist nominalists pretending to be situated beyond my sex. But I do not wish to claim that my body does not exist, or that I am not a woman. Beauvoir helps me to put it more clearly: in certain situations I wish my female body to be considered as the insignificant background of my claims or acts. This is not the same thing as to say that I wish my body to disappear or to be transformed into a male body. My wish does not represent an attempt to escape my particularity, to be considered as a neuter, or as some kind of universalized human being. It represents, rather, a wish to deny that the fact of being a woman is of any particular relevance to my understanding of trigonometry or my capacity to compose symphonies or think ethically.

Ever since feminism became part of public life, some women writers and painters (and so on) have felt that feminism is an ideology that locks women up in their particularized female subjectivity. Opposing such versions of feminism, they have refused to be called "women writers" and "women painters." Feminists have usually agreed that there is something anti-feminist about such a refusal to call oneself a woman, often responding by accusing such women of being male-identified and sadly lacking in solidarity with their sex. But the fact is that

women are right to refuse attempts to make their subjectivity out to be coextensive with their femininity. We have no reason to accept attempts to imprison us in our “femininity,” whether such attempts originate in sexist or in feminist thought. The problem arises when some women assume that the only way to escape imprisonment in one’s sex is to deny that sex altogether, and so actually give in to temptation to say: “I am a writer, not a woman writer.” In this way they only manage to foreground their claim to universality at the cost of sacrificing their femininity (here the word simply means their “femaleness”). They forget, a Beauvoirean might say, that the sexed body is both a background and a situation, and as such not a phenomenon that can simply be disavowed.

For I also wish to acknowledge that I probably do read Kant or Kierkegaard in ways I would not have done had I been a man. Yet the fact that I read as the woman I am is no reason to deprive me of my right to be considered an intellectual. *Must I always refer to myself as an “intellectual woman”?* Men who read Kant and Kierkegaard in ways they would not have done had they been women, usually refer to themselves as intellectuals or philosophers, not as “intellectual men” or “male philosophers.” This fact does not lead people to accuse them of denying or repressing their masculinity, or to consider them “female-identified.” In sexist ideology, men can be self-evidently male and self-evidently intellectual at the same time. This is why the phrase “an intellectual man” sounds quite odd whereas “an intellectual woman” sounds quite normal. Beauvoir’s feminist goal is to produce a society in which women will gain access to the universal *as women*, not as fake men nor as some impossibly neutered beings.

In a sexist society women often find themselves in situations where they are obliged to make a “choice” between being imprisoned in their femininity or having to disavow it altogether. That sexist ideologies and practices produce this alienating split in women’s subjectivity is Beauvoir’s most fundamental point in *The Second Sex*. For her, both alternatives are equally sexist and equally alienating. Because male subjectivity is not “hailed”

("interpellated") in this way, this alienating "choice" in fact defines women's situation under patriarchy. So insidious is this ideology that much feminist theory, whether willingly or not, has ended up espousing one alternative or the other. The amount of time feminists have spent worrying about women's "equality" or "difference" is a symptom of the success of this ideological trap. A genuinely feminist position would refuse either option, and insist, rather, that women should not have to choose between calling themselves women and calling themselves writers (or intellectuals, or painters, or composers). It remains an important feminist task to show that this way of thinking of female subjectivity produces an impossible ideological dilemma for women. By now I hope it is obvious that when I refuse to accept the terms of this "choice," then it does not follow that I really wish to be a man.

To put this differently: it does not go without saying that what a woman does or says is always expressive of "the woman in her." Yet at the same time, it is undoubtedly true that whatever a woman does or says is done by a woman. It is because both claims are true that we get so confused about what "femininity" actually means. What is admirable about Beauvoir's understanding of what a woman is, is precisely her capacity to convey this doubleness without reducing it to one or the other of its components, without acquiescing in it, and also without choosing one of the two equally unsatisfactory theories of what a woman is ("a woman is just a human being" *versus* "a woman is always just a woman").

By considering the body as a background Beauvoir at once affirms that sexual difference is a fact of fundamental philosophical and social importance *and* that it is not necessarily the most important fact about a human being. Because she pictures the sexed body as the phenomenological background (not the content, essence, or meaning) against which a woman's choices and acts will be foregrounded, these are not contradictory claims. As I go on to show in Chapter 2 of *What is a Woman?*, Beauvoir's formulation also reveals that her fundamental feminist project is to find a way of thinking about sexual difference which

steers clear of the Scylla of having to eliminate her sexed subjectivity and the Charybdis of finding herself imprisoned in it.



Abbreviations

For references to books written by Simone de Beauvoir, the following abbreviations have been used (the editions used are those listed under “Works Cited”):

| | |
|------------|-------------------------------------|
| <i>DSa</i> | <i>Le deuxième sexe</i> , vol i |
| <i>DSb</i> | <i>Le deuxième sexe</i> , vol ii |
| <i>FC</i> | <i>Force of Circumstance</i> |
| <i>FCa</i> | <i>La force des choses</i> , vol i |
| <i>FCb</i> | <i>La force des choses</i> , vol ii |
| <i>SS</i> | <i>The Second Sex</i> |

Notes

¹ This essay is an edited excerpt from Chapter 2 in my book *What is a Woman? And Other Essays*, published by OUP in 1999. Chapter 2 is called “I Am a Woman”: The Personal and the Philosophical.”

² “L'énoncé même du problème me suggère aussitôt une première réponse” (14). There are several translation problems here. The first and most common meaning of *énoncé* is *énonciation* or *déclaration*. Yet the expression *l'énoncé du problème* usually means the terms, or the exact formulation, of a problem. Linguistically, after Benveniste, *l'énoncé* has come to mean the statement as opposed to *l'énonciation*, the utterance, the act of making the statement. Given that Benveniste only published this distinction after 1949, it is probably not relevant

here. For once I agree with Parshley, and opt for the most common meaning, namely “the act of saying or declaring something.”

Parshley translates *une première réponse* as “a preliminary answer.” I don’t think the answer given here is preliminary in the sense of being a preface or a preamble to a more substantial answer to come. Rather, I think it is the first of two answers of equal weight. (The second answer given in this paragraph to “What is a woman?” is “Woman is the Other.”)

³ Beauvoir writes: “la situation singulière qu’occupent dans l’humanité les mâles” (14). At this point she inserts a footnote stating that the Kinsey report only deals with male sexual behavior, which is something else entirely.

⁴ I will return to the translation of this significant phrase.

⁵ Summarizing the reception of *The Second Sex* in *Force of Circumstance*, Beauvoir writes: “Unsatisfied, frigid, priapic, nymphomaniac, lesbian, a hundred times aborted, I was everything, even a clandestine mother . . . But that even [François] Mauriac joined in! He wrote to one of the contributors to *Les Temps Modernes*: ‘Your boss’s vagina no longer has any secrets for me’” (197; FCa 260–1).

⁶ For further discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s and Beauvoir’s critique of scientism and positivism, see Ch. 1 in *What is a Woman?*

⁷ I discuss this at length in Ch. 1 of *What is a Woman?*

⁸ Beauvoir writes: *les mots “femme” ou “féminin.”* In order to stress that the French *féminin* can refer to sex as well as to gender, I have chosen to translate it as “feminine or female.” See Ch. 1 in *What is a Woman?* for a thorough discussion of sex, gender, and *The Second Sex*.

⁹ Compare H. M. Parshley’s translation: “It is not our concern here to proclaim eternal verities, but rather to describe the common basis that underlies every individual feminine existence.”

¹⁰ There are strong parallels between this claim and the idea that “location” is always relevant for the understanding of every speech act. I want to stress that I am not trying to *deny* that sex or location are always relevant: I am, rather, trying to shift the argument towards a different question, namely the question of when (under what circumstances) it is worth while *saying something* about sex or location.

¹¹ I am not claiming that Fanon and Beauvoir understand racism and sexism in exactly parallel terms. For a brief comparison of the two writers, see Ch. 8 of my *Simone de Beauvoir*.

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RESPONSE TO TORIL MOI

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I am delighted to have the opportunity to comment on a paper by Toril Moi, whose work I much admire, and in particular to comment on this paper, which I consider to be not only brilliant but downright inspiring on many different levels. I am especially grateful to her for being willing to share her paper with us ahead of time. I do not want to take much of your time, so let me try to get expeditiously to what I find most suggestive and inspiring about this wonderful paper. Professor Moi rightly insists that we must try to get beyond “a debilitatingly narrow set of binary oppositions,” which have created an impasse in contemporary thought. These include (and I am stretching beyond her in some cases to dig out binaries that I think are present but not always explicitly formulated as such by her): theory vs. autobiography, equality vs. difference, essentialism vs. complete nominalism, monolithic causality vs. no causality at all, and so on. Her paper does *not* propose to *break through* this impasse in any of the usual ways, to deconstruct it, to blow it up, or to pretend that it does not exist. She does *not* rehearse all the old arguments on these vexed issues. Instead she argues in the deepest and most refreshing sense for “patience”: speaking of a key passage in Beauvoir she says, “I want to suggest instead that if we allow ourselves to be patient with this passage, it will emerge as the cornerstone of a truly original effort to think beyond the narrow choice between theory and autobiography . . .” (2). Her own paper writes large this same patience as well as this same ambition to build the cornerstone of a truly original effort to think beyond narrow binaries. She does this here—as she did

in her remarkable paper on Freud's Dora's case—by reading with and into the grain of the argument rather than simply and insistently against it. This kind of reading “with” has fallen out of fashion, and I think it is worth underlining just how fruitful such a style of reading can be.

Appropriately, her paper, I think, is about metaphor. She is seeking a way to understand “embodied subjectivity” in ways that valorize but do not reduce to gender. She finds a possible solution in Merleau-Ponty's “phenomenological materialism,” that is, in the metaphor of foreground/background. Foreground and background are precisely not binaries, I take her to be arguing. They represent alternating perspectives, rather than fixed categories, embodiments rather than discursive projections, or as she puts it, ways of understanding body as *presupposing* agency and at the same time as *enabling* agency to come into being. Agency here is not the space between or the space created by discursive systems; it has a location, dare I say, even an “origin,” perhaps to be safe, let us say, a “source.” Many have remarked on how “body” in cultural studies has come to mean all too often “writing about bodies.” This is what I mean by discursive projections rather than true embodiments. Ethnographers, in particular, have insisted that we need to return to some kind of kinesthetic sense of embodiment, to how it feels to be in a body. Professor Moi offers us ways of understanding the theoretical stakes of such kinesthetic embodiment through the particular understanding of this process of a singular, specific person, Simone de Beauvoir. Thus embodiment allows her to negotiate the terrain between theory and autobiography, as well as all the other binaries I listed before.

Now, it is not accidental, I suspect, that she has chosen her metaphor from the world of sculpture/architecture rather than literature (that is, from embodied as opposed to discursive aesthetics) or that she wants to align herself with Merleau-Ponty rather than, say, Derrida or Freud. By mentioning, albeit in passing, “phenomenological materialism,” she aims, it seems to me, to cut across the usual categories: she wants materialism without reductionism and perception without idealism. She thereby suggests that seeing is not just reading, that being IS be-

coming, that it is possible to theorize the practices of everyday life, that experience is not an empty discursive category but rather a pattern of shifting perceptions that calls out to be traced. Her invocation of Frantz Fanon is especially telling in this regard. Nothing goes without saying, but saying something is not just a mental operation. Her paper is one of the most astute and economical prescriptions that I have seen for intellectual work in our post-paradigm world. It requires patience, alright, for Professor Moi herself seems to refuse to prescribe, to lay out a fully formed new paradigm. Instead, she offers a way of seeing, ways of thinking about our ways of seeing. She does not offer to solve all the problems, but she does show, I think, how maintaining the sense of tension between background and foreground, perception and material determinations, body and self can provide us with new materials and new perceptions for understanding the world.



RESPONSE TO TORIL MOI

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To begin, as is customary, but also as I truly feel, I would like to thank our graduate students for organizing this conference, part of the now established series of gatherings on such pertinent and challenging topics. Their effort makes us all periodically gather in order to hear, sometimes speak, and always think, react and converse afterwards. I am also grateful to them for putting me on the spot, after a year of absence, on an issue so close to my heart. Finally, my gratitude goes to Toril Moi for motivating me to re-read Simone de Beauvoir's classic, and for challenging me to clarify to myself my position on theory, including feminist theory, and its/my relationship to the body.

As I was thus reading Beauvoir and Toril Moi's theorizing on Beauvoir, it became clear to me that, independently of my will my own response could only take the form of a narrative, personal and somewhat autobiographical. This necessity stems from my conviction that all utterances have an eminently personal, subjective, and embodied foundation. From the first word of any response (and what utterance is not one?), the mighty "I" is looming, linguistically and egotistically, over the structure of my argument: "you say . . . therefore I think . . .". And that personal pronoun, even if left unsaid, designates the locus of my utterance: my body as it stands here. Human, female, of a certain age, of European descent, rather short, carrying my ethnic heritage and my personal history in its own particular blend of lightness and heaviness, of comfort and shyness, of poise or embarrassment. There is no utterance of mine, as universalizing as it might sound, that does not draw from that particular body

its tone, its point of view, its style, its direction, its perspective. No sentence in which a careful reader would not be able to somehow uncover my body, draw it out, imagine it and build a partial identification with me, through their embodied mind. And if I wish, as Toril Moi, to ignore or have others ignore its color, shape, sex or place in a particular project of mine, it will be solely for reasons of textual economy or of style. Because, as central as my body is to me, it might not be of interest to my audience or readers. I might therefore choose to erase its traces in my text, write instead of speaking, use typing rather than handwriting, lean on acquired habits (such as a certain impersonal, universalizing phrasing), avoid the first person pronoun or use a language which ignores sexual difference. And yet, as hard as I cover it up, my body will remain in my words as a hidden origin, an origin “under erasure,” present/absent for others to recover in their reading if they so wish, or if they cannot help it.

The same stands, in my opinion, for a narrative versus a theoretical discourse: stories are my primary experience, the form through which I apprehend the world, the one that my mind stores most easily. I am full of stories, indeed *I am* my stories, from the shortest ones (one sentence stories, or propositions), to the longest (the story of my life). The very appearance of “I,” or “she” and “he,” for that matter, leads to a first verb, and thus to a narrative. To not resort to it is again only a secondary gesture, an erasure, a matter of convenience, of economy, of style. It can also be a strategy for reaching towards the audience (one used by philosophers more than by novelists, for instance). With some people, it might be an acquired habit, a second nature. With me it is mostly an issue of time: my “story” gets less and less narrative or personal as I work longer on it. My alter ego scolds me: “Come on, you’ll bore these poor people. Enough of yourself!” Then I prune: I cut out the superfluous, the unaesthetic.

As there was little time for such pruning in this case, you’ll have to hear how I re-read Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* this time, forty years after she wrote it and twenty years after I first read it. For that, I must quickly sketch out that first encounter. She (myself, at that time) is the daughter of an oxymoronic couple. The father: a self-made intellectual man of

peasant extraction in whose culture a wife must never be called her first name in public, an act considered improper because of its strong sexual connotations. A man who had to change in order to accommodate an enlightened wife, and then two growing and educated daughters. A man whom I liked to call in protest a “socialist family monarch.” The mother: an ex tom-boy, who wanted to be an agrarian engineer and settled for medicine as more feminine, who met her future husband in the partisan ranks in World War II and for a while refused to marry him because marriage was a reactionary institution. She, their daughter, a product of these two backgrounds and of an idealistic socialist education based on sexual equality (boys and girls in my class welded metal and studied astronomy, as well as domestic economy). *En somme*, nothing unusual for the country and the time. She, therefore, not so subjected to norms as to not find Freud’s intellectual acrobatics around female sexuality highly suspicious (“He is crazy!”), not so liberated as to not read him with worry (“Am I normal, then?”). If I remember well, she races through Beauvoir’s account with a mixture of enthusiasm and distaste: enthusiasm for Beauvoir’s pugnaciousness, displeasure to see her own situation as a woman so fully represented in *The Second Sex* (boredom, narcissism, the eternal issue of “looks,” etc.), and a vague distaste for the author’s uneasiness with womanhood, both in her theoretical and more personal writings. She is so fascinated by Beauvoir’s narrative that she gulps it down in one piece, and so uneasy that she wants it all finished as fast as possible. She wants to get over it.

That pretty much sums up her stance towards feminist theory in the next twenty years: fascinated, wants to get over it. And she finds out—like Brecht did in respect to politics which he hated—that in order to close the subject she has to get into it some more, and then some more. In this story of mine, feminism continues to serve as the ground which the young woman keeps crossing in order to build her own house elsewhere, the memento which marks her own intellectual path. And Beauvoir’s figure remains that humble, partly negated, partly ingested symbolic maternal body on which she erects, then disseminates, gathers and undoes again her own feminine[?], female[?], post-feminist[?], exiled[?],

evolving[?], just scattered[?] subjectivity. . . . It is the background that goes without saying for that avid mind who learns the art of reading from Derrida or de Certeau, verbal histrionics from Lacan, social questioning from Foucault, who gags on Kristeva's *La révolution du langage poétique* (left unfinished) and who admires Luce Irigaray's (to whom the above metaphors are clearly a reference) graceful impertinence towards the unpalatable: "Because in relation to the working of theory, the/a woman fulfills a twofold function—as the mute outside that sustains all systematicity; as a maternal and still silent ground that nourishes all foundations—she does not have to conform to the codes theory has set up for itself" (365). She discovers anew Beauvoir's sentence "One is not born a woman but rather one becomes one" when Judith Butler gives it a new twist. She realizes that her allegiance to theory is resolutely aesthetic, since the beautiful must indeed be the good (a connection guaranteed by classical Greek in which the word *theorein* signifies: to contemplate the universe's beautiful order). In such an allegiance, she may "take pleasure" in reading theory, as Toril Moi words it, but decides not to write it unless she can make it beautiful (no success yet). She slowly comes to understand the very fine line between freedom and necessity in these matters, and learns to make a choice out of personal limitations. And sometimes, she just plays truant to issues, reads Montaigne *because*, grabs a good novel, or sets up house and cleans it, or grows her garden, literally and metaphorically.

And now I come to the point in my story in which *vingt ans plus tard* I go back to Beauvoir. What does it give? The personal investment is less strong. In some ways, I must say it, *The Second Sex* has become obsolete. Obsolete in a good way: it can be taken for granted. It is no longer the discovery of a dutiful daughter gone feminist, but the story that your mother has already told you, or made you read. It has faded into the background for new subjectivities to form. My alter ego whispers the silly slogan of the Virginia Slims add: "You've come a long way baby." We all have, indeed. The epistemological and moral ground has shifted quite a bit since Beauvoir's account: women's history now exists and is shedding some myths and creating new

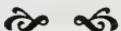
ones, as all histories tend to do; great contemporary literature is no longer male, and even the old literary canon has been somewhat refurbished; no longer do the bourgeois mothers in France carry on the same kind of domestic terrorism on their daughters; men who still propound the "mother or whore" theory have become the laughing stock and Montherlant can be laid to rest as not such a great period writer. . . . For that, I feel gratitude toward Simone who laid the foundation and allowed us to forget it under our busy constructions.

On another level, however, an ambiguous relationship still persists and I may choose to deny it, tempted by Toril Moi's generous reworking of Beauvoir's contradictions, or I may decide to explore it. The decision is a matter of allegiance, versus freedom, a freedom that one might see as impertinence. In other terms, again, a matter of mood or of economy of speech. A friend tells me "I don't like Simone de Beauvoir. She is like a *concierge*." I do not ask what she means, because I think I understand it in my own way: a *concierge* is a repository of endless small curious anecdotes about people. And I must admit my own fascination with Beauvoir's countless short narratives which constitute, for instance, her imaginary prehistory of womankind, or of female animal species. This time, what strikes me is not so much the naive conviction of the stories, but their sheer number, the collector's impulse, the incredible totalizing will behind them. I see Simone de Beauvoir as possessed by a collector's passion. The little girl growing into an old woman, *la petite fille appliquée*, *la jeune fille rangée*, *la jeune agrégée*, *la vieille dame un peu dépassée* telling bed-time stories to herself, to her students, to her nieces and their daughters, to all little reading girls (and boys). And I am reminded of another totalizing genre, the universal histories such as, say, Bossuet's, where I found the same fast succession of compressed narratives, invoked with eagerness to prove a point of faith. And with the somewhat cruel glance of a daughter at her mother, I say to myself: "She is aging. And she's not aging too well." But I am also aware that, as a mother of a kind, Beauvoir made possible my forgetting, her stories ground mine, "mon destin s'enlève sur le fond du sien."

And I want here to add to the verb *enlever* another set of connotations which resonated in me as I enjoyed Toril Moi's careful chiseling of its significance in Beauvoir's sentence. A military expression of the seventeenth century—"enlever un quartier"—made me check the *Trésor de la langue française* which quoted a few more meanings to the verb *enlever*: 1. "to get a hold of a military position, to master it by force" as in "enlever une tranchée d'assaut"; 2. "to obtain, to gain that which is the object of a combat, or competition" as in "enlever de haute lutte" (to win with flying colors); 3. "to perform a piece of music in a fast or powerful manner, like a virtuoso" or, in general, to provoke enthusiasm as in "enlever les suffrages" (to carry the votes). In its reflexive form, *s'enlever* also means "take one's flight" as in "prendre son envol" or "to start running" as in "prendre le galop." These meanings give us more food for thought: they carry connotations of a forceful appropriation of something contested, its mastering through struggle and through a carefully devised strategy. To the idea of mastery can be added that of movement, swiftness, and impetuousness. And though I heard from some French friends that *s'enlever* was simply part of the current philosophical parlance of the fifties, I would rather see in it, whether intentional or not, a new semantic opening: the assertion "I am a woman" is being appropriated by me, Simone, as my stronghold, through struggle, forcefully and impetuously, yet thanks to a carefully devised strategy. Such an appropriation of female destiny suscitates enthusiasm and carries off the votes. And likewise upon my assertion and my body of work "s'enlève tout existence féminine singulière"—every particular female existence can be mastered and appropriated by its subject.

As regards that process of self-appropriation which has indeed been under way since Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex*, I would like to conclude with a quotation. In her book, *Politique des sexes*, Sylviane Agacinski reminds us that humans come in two versions, without either being the negative of the other. "The logic of mixity," as she chooses to call it, "posits that a woman is not a man (an often stated fact), but, also, that a man is that individual who is not a woman (a less often stated fact)" (50, my translation). Thus, the sexual alternative is not played out be-

tween that which is present or absent, except in the sense in which the lack is twofold. Each of the two sexes is deprived of what the other has or is. In this perspective, there is no unilateral castration, as it were. In a way, sexual difference comes out of the logic of lack, in another, it suggests the idea of a double castration. Neither man nor woman is "the entire human." And although, in answer to Beauvoir and to Toril Moi, I do not think it is possible to exclude the gendered body from any manifestation of subjectivity, insofar as subjectivity is rooted in the body, today that is no longer a limitation for women any more than for men. I believe that, in respect to any male universalizing gesture, theoretically at least, the subject is closed. What remains, of course, is politics. . . .



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THE DEVIL IN DRAG: MORAL INJUNCTION OR SOCIAL LEAVEN?

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On September 25, 1792, the Revolutionary tribunal sentenced the elderly Jacques Cazotte to death for his counter-revolutionary activities. Unrepentant, he declared on the scaffold: “Je meurs comme j’ai vécu, fidèle à Dieu et mon Roi” (*Oeuvres* cxxix). The passages in his correspondence in which Cazotte criticizes the nobility and declares himself in favor of the *Tiers-état* have done little to nuance the stigma he acquired by plotting with the *émigrés* to reinstate the King.¹ Despite the fact that Cazotte wrote *Le Diable amoureux* some years before he began his counter-revolutionary scheming, publishing the original version in 1772 and the revised version in 1776, critics tend to read Cazotte’s novella in light of his conservative politics. It is my contention that though Cazotte privately strove to persuade his contemporaries to return to traditional values, his fictional work contributes to a more liberal vision of society. To substantiate this view, I will first reinterpret a passage from his text that is commonly perceived to be anti-Enlightenment as a Cartesian discourse; a discourse which could support critical readings of the text as misogynist. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of performance, I will then argue that Cazotte’s text effectively undercuts the potential misogyny of the Cartesian divide by purveying a notion of identity that is fully in keeping with a feminist politics.

First, a word about the common critical approach to Cazotte’s text. Georges Décote and Claudine Hunting, among others, read *Le Diable amoureux* as a moral allegory which casts

aspersion on philosophes and women.² While Cazotte readily acknowledged that his text lends itself to an allegorical reading, he nevertheless warned his readers to beware of reducing it to a single meaning (*Diable* 128). He frequently referred to his novella in an offhand manner, claiming to have written it “dans un instant de gaieté” (*Correspondance* 134). Décote astutely takes the relative insouciance of Cazotte’s comments to mean that he did not in the least consider his text to be an accurate representation of his mystical leanings; leanings that he was not to develop until much later (Décote 261, 265). Such evidence should help dispel the notion that Cazotte invested his novella with his political or moral convictions or that he intended it to dictate those of his readers. Though my primary aim below is to reassess the view of women which Cazotte’s depiction of Biondetta promotes, this aim is part of my more general interest in combatting a critical tendency to reduce Cazotte’s ingenuous phrasing to just so many harbingers of his final years, when he did ultimately perceive the devil in philosophers, women, and revolutionaries alike.³

In his study *L’itinéraire de Jacques Cazotte (1719–1792): De la fiction littéraire au mysticisme politique*, Décote argues that by placing theories of a systematically ordered universe and a defense of passionate human nature in the mouth of Biondetta—a creature of doubtful origin—Cazotte meant to warn his readers against the insidious views of the philosophes (296). Décote also notes, but does not elaborate upon, Biondetta’s conviction that “les passions constituent le ressort de l’union comme de l’interaction réciproque de l’âme et du corps” (295). Though Décote only employs such Cartesian terminology in passing, Biondetta’s defense of passionate human nature can be entirely reinterpreted in Cartesian terms, indicating that she need not be exclusively viewed as a fall-guy for the philosophes. Cazotte first evokes Descartes’s dualism when he has Alvare (the hero) address the following words to Biondetta, who is either the devil (as Alvare suspects) or a sylph (as she claims) in human form: “*Esprit qui ne t’es lié à un corps que pour moi, et pour moi seul, j’accepte ton vasselage et t’acorde ma protection*” (*Diable* 73). As a spirit in human form, Biondetta is in the unique position of being able

to contrast her extra- and intra-corporeal experiences. Because Descartes's mind/body divide has come to be understood as the difference between thought and physical machinery, Biondetta's description of her experience may not initially strike the reader as particularly Cartesian, for she refers neither to the pure thought of the mind nor to the pure mechanics of the body. In their recent re-examination of Descartes's dualism, however, Gordon Baker and Katherine J. Morris attest that the notion of sentience, which has dropped out of modern interpretations of Descartes's thought, was an essential component of his writings. They suggest that early modern readers of Descartes would have understood the mind/body divide as follows: the mind is the realm of rational thought and moral consciousness, the body the realm of sensory experience (essentially a "sentient machine"); at their juncture lies a set of internal senses, the seat of the passions, which govern the interactions of the two.⁴

Once the notion of sentience has been restored to the Cartesian model, the Cartesian component of Biondetta's story becomes plain. As a sylph, Biondetta recalls, she led an existence "sans sensations, sans jouissances" (*Diable* 92). Such is the state of being Descartes envisioned for the disembodied soul, for "the human mind separated from the body does not have sense-perception."⁵ Biondetta's explanation of her initial decision to assume mortal form for Alvare's sake does, indeed, seem to be more practical than emotional, and she accounts for this impression when she suggests that she only fell in love once she acquired a body: "Quand j'eus pris un corps, Alvare, je m'aperçus que j'avais un cœur. Je vous admirais, je vous aimais" (93). The implication is, then, that feeling love, like feeling anger or pain, arises from the conjunction of body and mind (Baker and Morris 126). Biondetta thus speaks like a true Cartesian when she describes the passions as "le seul ressort au moyen duquel l'âme et le corps peuvent agir réciproquement l'un sur l'autre et se forcer de concourir au maintien nécessaire de leur union!" (*Diable* 102).

Though delighting in the novelty of her sensations, Biondetta soon notes certain repercussions of her physical state upon her mental powers. Having gained the capacity to feel, she loses the

capacity to control her feelings. Such a situation, once again, is entirely in keeping with the idea that the conjunction of mind and body is not simply the sum of its parts. Biondetta, accordingly, attributes her increasingly petulant behavior to the fact that the novelty and force of her sensory experience is disrupting her ability to reason:

Je suis femme par mon choix, Alvare, mais je suis femme enfin, exposée à ressentir toutes les impressions; je ne suis pas de marbre. J'ai choisi entre les zones la matière élémentaire dont mon corps est composé; elle est très susceptible; si elle ne l'était pas, je manquerais de sensibilité. [. . .] Pardonnez-moi d'avoir couru le risque de prendre toutes les imperfections de mon sexe, pour en réunir, si je pouvais, toutes les grâces; mais la folie est faite et constituée comme je le suis à présent, mes sensations sont d'une vivacité dont rien n'approche: mon imagination est un volcan. (101–2)

Whereas Biondetta's Cartesian discourse has, until this point, remained fairly innocuous, in this passage Cazotte clearly plays up its misogynist implications. Descartes's distinction between body and mind, for example, applies to the human condition at large. Yet with the words "Je suis femme enfin," Cazotte links Biondetta's experience to her acquisition of a *female* body in particular. Furthermore, in Descartes's schema, nature is "the mechanism by means of which the body exercises its power to act on the soul in all forms of rational sense-perception" (Baker and Morris 142); the mechanism that has clearly governed Biondetta's recent experience. Yet Biondetta defends the workings of nature over and against cultural convention as part of a design to persuade Alvare to consummate their love before obtaining his mother's permission to marry. Biondetta's Cartesian discourse thus becomes, in effect, one of the womanly wiles she consecrates to her diabolical ends.

Judith Butler condemns the inherent misogyny of both the mind/body divide and the nature/culture binary, stating that in them "reason and mind are associated with masculinity and agency, while the body and nature are considered to be the mute

facticity of the feminine" (37). Cazotte clearly aligns Biondetta with the body and nature, and other aspects of his novella only seem to compound the evidence of his misogyny. His choice of subject (the devil in the guise of a woman) perpetuates an inherently misogynist legend. The possibility that the mind inhabiting Biondetta's body is the devil (gendered male) may well have helped generate the misogynist decadent trope of projecting a man's mind into a woman's body.⁶ Cazotte's apparent mockery of stereotypical female behavior, in which woman's tenuous capacity for reason cannot withstand the force of her emotions does nothing to alleviate this impression. Nor does the fact that Biondetta repeatedly gains the upper hand in confrontations by dint of her commanding personality and ability to cry on demand. In her book *La Femme devant le 'tribunal masculin'*, Claudine Hunting highlights the misogyny of Alvare's simultaneous fear of and desire for Biondetta, noting that the solution to his quandary lies in the masculine fantasy which posits woman as seductress, allowing man to enjoy her favors without incurring any guilt. Yet something about Cazotte's opposition of Alvare's and Biondetta's perspectives and his preference of an ending which implies that their romance may have been but a dream prompts Hunting to concede that "Cazotte, paradoxalement et peut-être inconsciemment, semble suggérer au lecteur . . . que la misogynie de l'homme est, en fin de compte, fondée sur des bases aussi illusoires que la création de Biondetta" (145).⁷ In order to discern how, precisely, Cazotte eludes and even dissipates the potentially misogynistic implications of the mind/body divide, I propose that we take a second look at Biondetta from Alvare's point of view.

At the beginning of the narrative, it must be remembered, both Alvare and the reader are fully convinced that Biondetta is the devil in disguise. Alvare has invoked Béelzébuth, and been confronted by a horrific camel, which becomes a spaniel at his behest. Noting that the spaniel is female, Alvare gives it the name Biondetta. Never once imagining that either its physical form or its gender is stable, however, he soon orders the spaniel to dress in his livery and serve his table, addressing her as Biondetto the moment she becomes a page. Having warned the page

that he will be called upon to entertain the guests, Alvare directs his next move by announcing the arrival of the opera singer “la signora Fiorentina,” upon which the page promptly exits. When the page reappears as the signora, Alvare describes the scene not, this time, as though the page has changed body, but merely as though he has cross-dressed, saying: “en assemblant les traits tels que le voile me le laissait apercevoir, je reconnus dans Fiorentina le fripon de Biondetto; mais l’élégance, l’avantage de sa taille se faisaient beaucoup plus remarquer sous l’ajustement de femme que sous l’habit de page” (64). Alvare is mesmerized by the page’s beauty, and his pleasure is clearly enhanced by the ambiguity of the page’s gender.

This ambiguity continues, insofar as the reader is concerned, throughout the first half of the novella. Alvare intimates that his page’s gender is purely a matter of personal preference when he exclaims in surprise and frustration, “Il vous plaît donc à présent d’être femme [. . .] ?” (67). Referring to his servant as “le pré-tendu page,” he calls him “il” until, recalling with longing the song of la signora Fiorentina, he alludes to the page as “elle” for the remainder of a restless night. Upon awakening, Alvare calls his page “il,” despite evidence to the contrary, for the page’s unbound hair reaches the ground. Swayed, perhaps, by the spectacle of the page’s beauty, Alvare reverts to “elle” mid-paragraph. Though at first Alvare switches between the names Biondetto and Biondetta as often as he switches between the pronouns “il” and “elle,” as his desire increases and the description of the page’s effeminate features multiply, he gradually gravitates towards Biondetta as the name of preference, and only the pronouns keep shifting. As the memory of the horrific camel fades, it becomes increasingly difficult for Alvare to associate the vision of loveliness before him with the specter that appeared when he invoked the devil. He is not convinced of her mortality, however, until he sees her expiring in her own blood, stabbed by a jealous courtesan, at which he exclaims: “Je ne vois plus qu’une femme adorée, victime d’une prévention ridicule . . . et accablée par moi, jusque-là, des plus cruels outrages” (89). With the words “Je ne vois plus qu’une femme” all gender ambiguity vanishes, and Alvare, readily convinced by Biondetta’s explanation that

she is a sylph who has assumed human form for love of him, no longer suspects her of being the devil.⁸ Having secured the requisite medical corroboration of Biondetta's claim to be a woman—"son sexe fut avéré par la nécessité de panser ses bles-sures" (91)—Alvare proceeds to dress her, treat her, and have her waited upon as befits her sex. It is at this point that Cazotte presents Biondetta's side of the story in the course of which, as we have seen, every emotional outburst seems to confirm her female nature.

Having donned a body as easily as a woman would clothing, Biondetta completes her costume, in a sense, by adding layer upon layer to the image of woman she presents: feminine features, a haunting voice, flowing hair, a half-moon fingernail, a perfect thigh, modesty, the propensity to blush, languishing love, frailty, breasts, effusive emotion, uncontrollable desire—all signs of woman. The narrative thus exposes how such cultural constructs are gradually consolidated. It bears out Butler's assertion that "acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core" (136), for Alvare finds it increasingly preposterous to imagine that Biondetta's interior does not match her ever-more feminine exterior, and welcomes the explanation that she is sylph instead of devil with veritable relief. Though Alvare initially seems to be aware of the performative nature of gender, he is gradually convinced by the performance, and ultimately forgets that it is one.

Whereas Alvare gradually becomes the dupe of the reification of gender norms, the reader remains sensitive to the gender play and the homoerotic overtones which Alvare finds pleasurable but does not necessarily care to confront. Having witnessed the gradual compounding of Alvare's error, we are disinclined to make the same mistake, and less apt to forget—in the space of 75 pages—Cazotte's incessant disruption of our cultural conditioning. The shifting pronouns, our uncertainty as to whether we are up against the mind of devil, sylph, or human, and our confusion as to whether bodies or clothing are being exchanged all help dissociate the traditional alignment of sex, gender, and performance. Consider the scene in which Biondetta assumes the guise of *la signora Fiorentina*. Alvare is fully convinced that he is

watching the devil in the form of a page in woman's clothing. Cazotte thus forces the reader to recognize the distinction between the anatomy of the performer, the gender of the performer, and the gender of the performance (Butler 137). By distinguishing between these levels, Butler argues both against Descartes's mind/body divide, in which the mind is, in some sense, foundational and the body mere "extension" *and* against a cultural commonplace in which the sex of the body is foundational and gender mere extension. Contrary to expectations, Cazotte does not dwell on the foundational elements of each binary (the rational mind and the sex of the body) which constitute the conventional understanding of how an individual is constructed. Instead, he devotes the majority of his text to depicting the elements of extension, namely disruptive sensations and gender slippage. His text thus implicitly questions whether identity is mentally or physically determined, and by multiplying scenes and levels of performance, combats the notion that identity can ever be fixed.

By the time we get an exclusive interview with Biondetta, who has done little but sing and serve throughout the first half of the text, we have thus been made fully aware of the factitious nature of gender norms. Biondetta's narrative appears to consolidate such norms by creating a "unified picture of woman" (Butler 137). Cazotte undercuts this unified picture, however, by sustaining the possibility that Biondetta is the devil in drag. Butler views drag as the ultimate dissociation of sex, gender and performance, stating that "*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*" (137–8). By perpetuating the possibility that Biondetta is neither what she seems (a woman) nor what she claims to be (a sylph), Cazotte renders it impossible for us to read his depiction of Biondetta as misogynist, for her stereotypical profile only serves to expose the contingency of the construct. In suggesting that the gender of a person's inner essence might differ from the sex of the body, Cazotte's text goes beyond those of his contemporaries, many of whose texts feature cross-dressed characters. It gets at the very heart of the notion of drag, which reveals both the discrepancy between gendered clothing and the

sex of the body, and between the sex of the body and the gender of the “self” (Butler 137).

Though Cazotte’s political views became increasingly conservative with the years, his textual revisions had the opposite effect. In the first, unpublished version of *Le Diable amoureux*, for example, Biondetta proved to be the devil and became the bane of Alvare’s existence. In the 1772 version, the first to be published, Cazotte has Alvare detect the devil’s ploy before it is too late, obviating any need for a second part, but maintaining the equation Biondetta = Béelzébuth. Had Cazotte been satisfied with either of these versions, a reading of his text as misogynist would be fully warranted. Yet in the final version, published in 1776, neither the reader nor Alvare learns the truth of Biondetta’s identity. The ambiguity lies in what is commonly read as the seduction scene. Ceding to Alvare’s insistence that they seek his mother’s permission to marry before consummating their love, Biondetta cries out “Sera-ce assez t’abaisser, malheureuse sylphide?” and bursts into tears (116). We are inclined to read the double dotted line that interrupts Alvare’s efforts to comfort her as a sign that Biondetta has finally overcome his resistance to her charms. Yet the double line may also be an indication that Alvare has fallen asleep, and dreams Biondetta’s subsequent declaration of victory and revelation that she is, indeed, the devil.⁹ Ultimately, we do not know whether Alvare has dreamt the entire episode as his mother suggests, has been the devil’s dupe as the doctor insists,¹⁰ or wrongfully suspects an innocent sylph who pines for him in the next village.¹¹ This final version of the text, fraught with uncertainties, is the most progressive solution,¹² for the reader’s inability to point to “an ‘I’ that preexists signification” sustains the notion that identity is constituted through performance (Butler 143).

Using the disjunction Descartes posits between mind and body to his own ends, Cazotte toys with what mind inhabits a given body and proliferates the bodies that house a given mind, experimenting with a subject Descartes never broached, namely when gender becomes manifest. By the end of *Le Diable amoureux* we still do not know where gender starts and how it is determined. Is the mind gendered (devil/sylph)? the body (“son

sex fut avéré par la nécessité de panser ses blessures")? the will ("il vous plaît donc à présent d'être femme")? clothing (page/diva)? Far from reproducing the potential misogyny of the Cartesian divide, Cazotte multiplies its terms to dispel its implications. His text thus begins the work of displacing gender norms through performance and establishing alternative identities through repetition that Butler considers to be consistent with a feminist politics (147). Despite the fact that Cazotte himself became increasingly entrenched in his view that the Revolution was the devil incarnate, his text continues to act as a "social leaven," the term Diderot used to acknowledge the invaluable social function performed by Cazotte's marginal friend Jean-François Rameau: "c'est un grain de levain qui fermente qui restitue à chacun une portion de son individualité naturelle" (47).



Notes

¹ Georges Décote, editor of Cazotte's *Correspondance*, cites Cazotte's letter of January 1, 1789 to furnish evidence that certain of Cazotte's political views seem to be in keeping with both the Enlightenment and the Revolution (*L'itinéraire* 414–15).

² The pertinent passages in Décote are as follows: for his allegorical reading see 283–292; against the philosophes, 292–297; against women, 289, 421. Almost the entirety of Hunting's analysis addresses these themes.

³ See note 2 for pertinent pages in Décote. Pierre-Georges Castex notes that the tendency to interpret Cazotte's works as prophetic arose early in the nineteenth century. He also remarks that Nerval placed *Le Diable amoureux* "entre les fantaisies de l'Anglais Sterne et les cauchemars de l'Allemand Hoffmann" (32–33), a remark that seems

to suggest how Cazotte's text should be read. Unfortunately, though Castex states, "Convenons-en: l'intention du *Diable amoureux* n'est guère plus sérieuse que celle des contes précédents" (32), he nevertheless upholds the critical tendency to subject *Le Diable amoureux* to an allegorical interpretation (40).

⁴ Baker and Morris's study is the result of an exhaustive review of both Descartes's writings and what they call the "Cartesian Legend," or the understanding of Descartes that has been disseminated by his most influential readers. I therefore rely on their study to identify those aspects of the mind/body divide that may have been accessible to an eighteenth-century reader of Descartes, but that have ceased to be part of the current understanding of his dualism.

⁵ Quotation from Descartes, cited in Baker and Morris, 165. Their sources include Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1897–1910) V: 402, and *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) III: 380.

⁶ Castex has argued, and Todorov agreed, that *Le Diable amoureux* is the French predecessor of fantastic fiction (Castex 25–41; Todorov 28–45). As E.T.A. Hoffmann and Gérard de Nerval were avid readers of Cazotte, it is distinctly possible that the themes of his novella continued to be influential throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century.

⁷ Though Hunting's observation is quite a good one, it remains unsatisfactory in that she does not credit Cazotte with having made a conscious choice to perpetuate the paradoxical nature of his work, implying that his message remains ambiguous *malgré lui*.

⁸ Alvare's leap of faith involves the following reflection: "L'homme fut un assemblage d'un peu de boue et d'eau. Pourquoi une femme ne serait-elle pas faite de rosée, de vapeurs terrestres et de rayons de lumière, des débris d'un arc-en-ciel condensés? Où est le possible? . . . Où est l'impossible?" (94). Alvare is thus quite far from considering woman to be man's rib, a conviction we might expect either a misogynist or a strictly allegorical text to uphold.

⁹ This reading is suggested by Franc Shuerewegen's insightful observation that the dotted line is not necessarily an indication that the couple has consummated their union (58–59).

¹⁰ The doctor's final words curtail the misogynist implications of his interpretation of Alvare's experience. He explicitly recommends that Alvare marry a woman of his mother's choosing, saying "dût celle que vous tiendrez de sa main avoir des grâces et des talents célestes, vous ne serez jamais tenté de la prendre pour le Diable" (125). His words imply both that such a woman exists (and therefore that not all women are devils in disguise) and that Alvare's belief that Biondetta is the devil may stem from his mistrust of women, which the doctor clearly considers inappropriate in most cases.

¹¹ When Alvare awakens, he finds himself fully clothed on unrumpled sheets and is told that Biondetta, having spent the night with the farmer's wife, and therefore presumably not with him, has already ventured forth as far as the next village where she expects him to join her later (120).

¹² Hunting notes that, between the two possible endings, "il est remarquable que Cazotte ait, en dernière analyse, choisi le second" (145). Once again, however, she stops short of concluding that Cazotte's ultimate choice of ending should perhaps persuade critics to reconsider not only to what extent his text can be read through his politics, but how his politics are to be understood.

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ETHICS BEYOND THE BODY: DESCARTES AND HEIDEGGER IN EMMANUEL LEVINAS'S *TOTALITY AND INFINITY*

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In his *thèse de doctorat*, published in 1961 as *Totalité et Infinit*, Emmanuel Levinas sought to interrogate and rethink the Western philosophical tradition, which he saw as a tradition of Totality, and to shift the emphasis of his project away from a concern with the body as the locus of representation, and towards an understanding of the Other.¹ In doing so Levinas works from Martin Heidegger's critique of Western metaphysics by removing the emphasis on the *ego cogito* from the center of the equation but he does not follow Heidegger in shifting the emphasis of his investigation toward Being. Instead, Levinas discovers an unexpected ally in the implementation of a Heideggerian critique of metaphysics. Levinas turns to René Descartes as understood through Heidegger's critique of intellectualism in order to shift the focus of his argument from an emphasis on the primacy of the "I" as located in the body, to an emphasis on the exterior relation to the Other. This is not the Descartes employed by Edmund Husserl or Jean-Paul Sartre but instead the Descartes of the "Third Meditation."

In Descartes's reflections on the relation of the finite to the infinite, Levinas saw the key to escaping the concept of Totality that had dominated Western philosophy from Plato to Heidegger:

It is true that I have the idea of substance in me in virtue of the fact that I am a substance; but this would not account for my having the idea of an infinite substance,

when I am finite, unless this idea proceeded from some substance which really was infinite. (Descartes 31)

This utilization of Descartes implies a return to intellectualism as in the work of Husserl since it relies on the “idea of infinity” as produced by an “I think,” but what is significant for Levinas is precisely the limited nature of intellectualism as shown in Heidegger’s critique of representation. For Levinas, the idea of infinity exceeds the limits of representations, it exceeds the body in which it is produced and thus puts the primacy of the *ego cogito*, as the source of thought and representation, in permanent question. Levinas works with and against Heidegger in his use of Descartes to remove the primacy of the “I” (which was also Heidegger’s project) but without removing the “I” as the source of cognition and prime locus of philosophy (which is antithetical to Heidegger’s project). This conservation of the radical singularity of the “I” is more than a movement away from the ontology of Being as in Heidegger because it also serves to break with the program of Totality that seeks to incorporate the “I” into a larger model or system, be it positivism, neo-Kantian rationalism, or the Hegelian concept of Absolute Knowledge. Levinas opposes his understanding of Infinity to the traditional understanding of Totality, a concept structurally linked to all totalizing projects based on thematization and representation. Their source is ultimately the body of the subject (the Same), the meter by which all else is measured. Totalizing structures, while necessary for society to exist, are potentially devastating and disastrous if the rule of Totality banishes Infinity, which Levinas characterizes as the source of all ethics and as exterior to the body. Thus there is much at stake for Levinas who explains, in astonishing understatement, that his critique of Totality “came, in effect, after a political experience that we have not forgotten” (*Ethique* 73).² The primary reference is to National Socialism.

Totality and Infinity

Totality and Infinity is an especially difficult book because it serves both as a critique and rehabilitation of Western philoso-

phy. Thus the book does not serve as a clean break with the Western metaphysical tradition, as in Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism," but is rather an attempt to reread Western philosophy in a new light, shifting the emphasis through an internal critique of the Western philosophical tradition. While relying heavily on the work of Heidegger as the source of his critique of traditional intellectualist and theoretical philosophy, Levinas mobilizes this revised understanding of intellectualist philosophy against Heidegger. Unlike Heidegger, Levinas does not want to displace the intellectualist tradition but instead to reread it in light of its limitations as presented in Heidegger's critique of representation. Levinas's goal is not to remove the subject from philosophical investigation but to put it in question permanently. For these reasons *Totality and Infinity* is also an extremely difficult book to explicate because it folds in on itself. The concept of Totality, which Levinas sets up in opposition to Infinity as the all encompassing unity that seeks to remove all singularity in the need to establish a universal whole and from which the singular being must separate itself, turns out to be based on the model of that separated being as manifested in the body, the locus of representation. Thus one cannot consider this model in any sort of progressive or teleological fashion but only as an ambiguous relation. To understand the relation of Levinas's work to Heidegger's and to Descartes's, and his break with traditional French philosophy, we must first try to establish the two categories of Totality and Infinity as understood by Levinas and then read Levinas's understanding of the place of the finite being, the subject, back into these two categories so that we can see how Levinas attempts to redefine metaphysics as ethics in a way that uses Heidegger's philosophy to re-think Descartes.

Totality

For Levinas, Totality describes the essence of the Western philosophical tradition. As the basis for politics, war, and most institutions in society, Totality is the system of Universal Reason that attempts to codify everything within a unifying theory or practice. As such, Levinas portrays Totality as the tyranny of the Same, whereas, Infinity is characterized as the opening to alter-

ity. In the critique of Totality which comports the association between the two words (Totality and Infinity) there is a reference to the history of philosophy. This history can be interpreted as a tendency toward Universal synthesis. It is a reduction of all experience and all that is sensible to a Totality that engulfs the world and does not let anything outside in, so that consciousness becomes absolute thought.

This tendency toward Totality can be traced to the model of the individual subject, as manifested in the body, from which it is extrapolated. Particular experience becomes Universal synthesis on the basis of thematization and representation: “the consciousness of the self is at the same time consciousness of everything. . . . There are very few protestations against this totalization in the history of philosophy” (*Ethique* 69). For Levinas, all systems of thought that aspire to pure reason or Absolute Knowledge are examples of this totalizing tendency, which seeks to make that which is Other conform to the rules of the Same. “The ‘I’ is identical in its very alterations. It represents them to itself and thinks them. The universal identity in which the heterogeneous can be embraced has the ossature [framework] of a subject, of the first person. Universal thought is an ‘I think’” (*Totality* 36).

Universal thought does not open to the Other but represents what is other as recognizable to the same. In the Hegelian system where the “I” confronts the Other the encounter between the “I” and the Other is not based on a desire to understand difference but instead on the desire to define and possess the Other in relation to the “I.” The Desire for Recognition, as in Alexandre Kojève’s presentation in his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, is a desire that the Other recognize you at the value you feel you are worth. It is not a desire to discover the worth of the Other. The fact that the encounter leads either to Mastery or Slavery shows that this model is based on “the possibility of possessing, that is, of suspending the very alterity of what is only at first Other, and Other relative to me” which is “the way of the Same” (*Totality* 38).

The totalizing tendency goes beyond philosophies of conflict (such as Hegel’s dialectic); even utopian, positivist, or idealist philosophies that deal only with Universal Principles are sites of

Totality. What makes Totality so dangerous is that it rests in the guise of such formulas as the “universal rights of man,” and thus appears to be the basis of morality, when in fact it suppresses any possibility of morals.

Absolute Knowledge as it has been researched, promised, or presented by philosophy is a thinking of Equals. In “truth” Being is engulfed. Even if “truth” is considered as never definite it still promises a truth that is more complete and more absolute. There is no doubt that because we are finite beings we could never achieve this task, but on the basis by which this task is attempted it consists in making the Other become the Same. (*Ethique* 85)

For Levinas, the project of Totality is the project of equivocation, of creating categories of definition based on perception, specifically vision. It is a process of objectification and classification that removes all that is particular and different in order to create a universal system of representation.

Even in the critique of Totality it is still possible to embrace it. This is the nature of Levinas’s claim against Heidegger whom Levinas credits as supplying the critique of representation and the intellectualist tradition of theory centered in the “I” and the body of the subject. While Levinas agrees with Heidegger’s critique of the limitations of intellectualism, Levinas did not believe Heidegger had escaped the influence of Totality. Levinas sees Heidegger’s removal of the subject, Cartesian *cogito*, as playing into the hands of the totalizing tendency. For Levinas, Heidegger’s removal of the primacy of the subject would have been significant if it had opened the clearing to the Other. Instead, Heidegger removed the “I” and shifted his focus to the question of anonymous Being, in effect denying the possibility of primacy to either the “I” or the Other. For Heidegger, Being is primary. According to Levinas, Heidegger’s ontology of Being is a structure of Totality because it subsumes all beings under the rubric of an anonymous and total Being that is complete unto itself. “The relation with Being that is enacted as ontology consists in neutralizing the existent in order to comprehend or grasp it. It is

hence not a relation with the Other as such but the reduction of the Other to the Same" (*Totality* 45–6).

Levinas sees Heidegger's critique of the Western metaphysical tradition as valid but sees Heidegger's philosophical project as removing any possibility for an ethics, precisely by focusing on Being and thereby removing the subject from the equation. For Levinas, this emphasis on anonymous Being can only lead to the domination of particular beings by the general category of Being. By removing the subject Heidegger removes the locus of any encounter with the Other, obviating ethics. In his emphasis on Being, Heidegger seeks to avoid egocentric subjectivity, while for Levinas "alterity is only possible starting from me" (*Totality* 40). This is to say that it is only from the position of the subject, the me, in relation to the Other that an engagement with the Other as Other becomes possible. What makes this structure difficult to grasp is that while the encounter with the Other can only occur in relation to the particular subject, the particular subject (the "I") is the basis for the philosophy of Totality which seeks to subsume the Other as part of the Same through universal thematization and objectification.

Levinas claims that the tendency toward Totality is based on a misreading because "the common element that allows me to speak of an objective society by which man comes to resemble an object is not the first" (*Ethique* 72). This is to say there is a moment prior to the construction of "objective society" that is the basis on which we have society. This leads Levinas to question whether "the social, with its institutions, Universal forms, and laws, comes to limit the consequences of war between man, or whether it limits the infinite that opens the ethical relation between man and man?" (*Ethique* 75). For Levinas, the answer is clearly the latter. But society cannot simply be dismissed: universal reason based on representation and thematization is necessary for human beings to exist collectively. A society could not exist without recourse to general rules or codes that define the parameters of that society. Levinas is not suggesting dismissal of the concept of Totality but rather a rethinking of that concept in relation to Infinity, without which the outwardly directed but self-absorbed project of Totality, whose prime goal is to organize

men and things into structures of power and thus give them control over nature and each other, goes completely unchecked and completely outside the realm of the ethical (Poirié 12). While organization and objectification are necessary at some level, this project can have horrendous repercussions if left unchecked. In response to the unbridled rule of Totality, Levinas offers the possibility of Infinity.

Infinity

According to Levinas, Infinity is the most difficult concept to grasp precisely because it is not graspable. Infinity is beyond representation and thematization and thus completely beyond what is comfortable or controllable for a finite being. We have recourse to Infinity but not to the understanding of Infinity. It presents itself in forms like Levinas's construct of the *il y a*, which is the rumbling of infinite and anonymous Being—and as such is beyond any particular subject. Levinas also offers the model of the elements (earth, sky, wind, sea), which imply the infinite to us in our finite understanding of the world; we cannot grasp the elements as we grasp an object. They are not representable. We name them but, according to Levinas, we cannot thematize them. They always exceed our attempts to contain them:

The navigator who makes use of the sea and the wind dominates these elements but does not thereby transform them into things. They retain the indetermination of elements despite the precision of the laws that govern them, which can be known and taught. The element has no form containing; it is content without form. . . . The depth of the element prolongs it till it is lost in the earth and the heavens. "Nothing ends, nothing begins." (*Totality* 131)

The elements and the *il y a*, which are closely related, imply Infinity but they do not announce it. This is to say that the presence of Infinity is felt in our everyday life, but as anxiety, unease, and discomfort, because it is a feeling of lack of control. We flee from this anxiety that is produced by the *il y a* and the

elements, seeking refuge in the totalizing structures that give us the illusion that we are in control over the world. Thus in confronting the elements or the *il y a* we do not recognize the Infinite but only the menace of the unknown.

Levinas presents us with a seemingly paradoxical structure; the exteriority of Infinity is unrepresentable, entirely beyond the grasp of finite being, but at the same time it is the only means by which the "I" can engage the Other in its alterity without reducing it to the Same. But if the Infinite does not present itself for thematization because it is unrepresentable, how can we have recourse to the Infinite and thus to ethics? Levinas's answer is that the Infinite is the original moment prior to finite being, prior to the body, prior to representation, and prior to Totality. Infinity is always already there for us as implied in the elements. The question thus becomes how we recognize the Infinite: how do we recognize that which is beyond our capacities for recognition? Here Levinas turns to Descartes and doubles back on his own critique of Totality to reread the philosophical tradition and articulate how we come to engage the moment, prior to Totality, which is the realm of Infinity.

It is true that I have the idea of substance in me in virtue of the fact that I am a substance; but this would not account for my having the idea of an infinite substance, when I am finite, unless this idea proceeded from some substance which really was infinite. (Descartes 31)

For Levinas, the realization of Infinity can occur only through the intellectual act of reflection, which requires a *cogito*, as Husserl pointed out, but for Levinas a *cogito* understood as limited in its capacity. For Levinas, Infinity lies outside of the realm of equivocation and thematization, which is the realm of the Same extrapolated from the body of the finite being, and thus stands as entirely Other. The *cogito* can think the idea of Infinity but our idea of Infinity is necessarily inadequate, as Descartes shows. For Levinas, all other ideas can be made to fit into a Husserlian model of intentionality, but the idea of Infinity exposes the limited nature of representation:

The idea of Infinity is exceptional in that its *ideatum* surpasses its idea, whereas for the things the total coincidence of their ‘objective’ and ‘formal’ realities is not precluded; we could conceivably have accounted for all the ideas, other than that of Infinity, by ourselves. (*Totality* 49)

The idea of Infinity does not come from the interior but somehow from the outside. The idea of Infinity punctures the Self as that which is always the Same and opens it to that which comes from outside, to that which is totally Other. “Infinity is characteristic of a transcendent being as transcendent; the infinite is the absolutely Other” (*Totality* 49). By returning to the intellectualist tradition through his critique of Totality, Levinas presents the relationship with Infinity that comes to us in our relationship with the Other as the relationship between a specific *ego cogito* and that which exceeds it and thus places its primacy in question. For Levinas, this rapport between the Same and the Other can only occur to a thinking being capable of reflection. This relationship with Infinity is not produced by the thinking being—the “I” does not escape Totality by itself. Instead, it is produced by the Other, which pierces the “I” and breaks Totality. “It is not ‘I’ who resists the system, as Kierkegaard thought; it is the Other” (*Totality* 40).

Thus as Levinas presents it, it is the presence of the Other that produces the idea of Infinity in the isolated subject (the Same). This is because the Other is beyond me, completely exterior to me, and resists thematization and objectification. Whereas Totality attempts to incorporate the Other as the Same, Infinity opens up the possibility of accepting the Other in all its alterity and as such calls into question the primacy of the “I” (the Same). At this moment the “I” must relinquish its dominant position as “the measure of all things” in favor of the Other that Levinas considers the origin of ethics. “The idea of Totality and the idea of Infinity differ precisely in that the first is purely theoretical, while the second is moral” (*Totality* 83). But the ideas of Totality and Infinity are thus linked because the separated finite being requires the realm of the theoretical to produce the idea of the

infinite which comes from the Other and places the idea of Totality in question.

Infinity occurs only after reflection in the model of Husserl's "consciousness of," but reflection is not sufficient to contain Infinity. The importance of Heidegger's critique of intellectualism is that it allows Levinas to conserve a space for Infinity in the realm that is beyond representation. Like in Heidegger, Levinas does not jettison intellectualism but returns to it through a nuanced reading based on Heidegger's critique.

The idea of Infinity does not proceed from the I, nor from a need in the I gauging exactly its own voids; here the movement proceeds from what is thought and not from the thinker. It is the unique knowledge that presents this inversion—a knowledge without a prior. The idea of Infinity is *revealed*, in the strong sense of the term. . . . Infinity is not the "object" of a cognition (which would be to reduce it to the measure of the gaze that contemplates), but is that which is approachable by a thought that at each instant *thinks more than it thinks*. (*Totality* 61–2)

This construction is not Husserlian, because the contemplative act is inverted so that the *cogito* does not produce the idea of Infinity as in the concept of intentionality. But it is certainly not Heideggerian either because the emphasis is still on a *cogito* and the intellectual process in the model of intentionality. Instead, this model is based on the breach of the separated finite being, the Same, which occurs in the idea of Infinity which is produced in the relation with the Other. This is the moment of discourse. "Truth arises where a being separated from the Other is not engulfed in him, but speaks to him. Language, which does not touch the Other, even tangentially, reaches the Other by calling upon him or by commanding him or by obeying him, with all the straightforwardness (*droiture*) of these relations" (*Totality* 62).

According to Levinas, man's principal and originary relationship is not with finitude, as Heidegger had supposed, but instead with language. But language is also dangerous because it necessarily leads to thematization, which is the realm of the

Same. Language is always in danger of degrading and becoming a mechanism of the Same that removes the alterity of the Other. For Levinas, what is essential in language is that it is given. Its use already implies the Other in all its alterity. Language ruptures interiority, pierces the body, and opens separated finite being up to the Infinite through the act of speech, which implies the Other. Language is always more than it is and thus always implies the infinite. Language is a constant calling into question of the primacy of the Self in the face of the Other who gives me language: "A calling into question of the Same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the Same—is brought about by the Other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other 'ethics'" (*Totality* 43). The presence of the Other is announced in discourse, which presupposes all of the other social structures that exist under the rubric of Totality. Thus the calling into question of the self by the presence of the Other as manifested in language is the primary moment of philosophy and society and affirms the primacy of ethics.

Language announces the Other in its alterity and thus it places the Self in question, and by placing the Self in question it opens up the possibility of an ethical society based on alterity instead of homogeneity. "The relation of the face to face both announces a society and permits the maintaining of a separated 'I'" (*Totality* 67–8). Thus for Levinas, community is not originally established on the model of Totality but on the basis of the face-to-face, which is the model of alterity. Levinas wants to rethink society in light of this revelation which presupposes the relation with the Other, Infinity.

Levinas does not want to break with metaphysics but to reread it through his conception of ethics. Our understanding of concepts like Desire, Freedom, Responsibility, and Language can then take account of the primacy of Infinity and the necessity of thinking alterity, and only then can philosophy break the grip of Totality and present the possibility of an ethical society. But Levinas does not present this rethinking in the form of a prescription or programmatic imperative. This would be a return to the model of the Same. Instead Levinas attempts to construct a system based on that which cannot be thematized or object-

ivized. It is not a program of political engagement but of philosophical instruction, a teaching that offers the possibility of more than it says.

In this light Levinas is able to reevaluate such structures as work, economy, the state, and even philosophy based on the idea of Infinity (the Other) and not on the idea of Totality (the Same). In this sense, Levinas's work is the systematic development of an understanding that had never been thought through before (*Totality* 19). Levinas presents a system based entirely on difference, not homogeneity. Thus Levinas challenges all of the previous Western philosophical traditions to rethink their projects in light of the possibility of Infinity, the possibility of alterity.

Conclusion

Levinas's attempt to move beyond the Western metaphysical tradition by rehabilitating the very meaning of metaphysics is especially interesting in Levinas's use of Descartes, as filtered through Heidegger, to *displace* the primacy of the *ego cogito* in favor of the Other. But Levinas's work also opens up the possibility of rereading the Western philosophical tradition in the light of an ethics of alterity, plurality, and difference. Levinas turned away from traditional philosophy and the work of Heidegger to engage what he felt was the most pressing issue of philosophy in the wake of the Shoah, namely an understanding of the ethical relation with the Other. Rather than turning away from metaphysics, Levinas sought instead to redefine metaphysics as first and foremost ethics but as ethics which come from the Other: an ethical system from beyond the body of the subject.



Notes

¹ This paper is based on an investigation I began in chapter eight of my dissertation, *The Reception of Martin Heidegger's Philosophy in France: 1927–1961*, diss., UCLA, 1998 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1998).

² All translations from *Ethique et Infini* are my own.

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INCARNATING DECADENCE: READING DES ESSEINTES'S BODIES

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“Decadence” is a highly suggestive label. Extravagantly dressed dandies who hunt for refined sensual experiences, full of disdain for the banal pleasures of the masses, as well as sexually threatening women preying on men immediately come to our mind. An etymological approach to the term reveals that it originally expressed the decline of a classical standard of values, and indeed, our first associations refer to characters who strictly deny established values, bourgeois moral values in particular. Yet, does this define them sufficiently as “decadent”? A serial killer puts himself beyond the law, so does everyone who evades taxation, but we would hardly call such people “decadent.”

In my reading of Joris-Karl Huysmans’s novel *A Rebours*, I will argue for a definition of decadence on the grounds of physical experience. Its protagonist, des Esseintes, displays a catalogue of characteristics which reflect many of our first associations with the term. He is portrayed on the very first page of the novel as the last offspring of a declining, aristocratic family:

La décadence de cette ancienne maison avait, sans nul doute, suivi régulièrement son cours; l’effémination des mâles était allée en s’accentuant; comme pourachever l’œuvre des âges, les des Esseintes marièrent, pendant deux siècles, leurs enfants entre eux, usant leur reste de vigueur dans les unions consanguines. (Huysmans 61)

Thus the first denotation of decadence the text offers is based on the nineteenth-century idea of physical decline via incest. Decadence in the wake of the popular reception of Darwin's evolutionary theories would find ample attention in Max Nordau's notorious work *Degeneration*.

Taking this rough definition as my point of departure, I will try to trace the discourses the novel draws on to form des Esseintes's character as well as the remains of a plot, i.e., if it can still be considered a plot. Thus I will try to explain in which ways des Esseintes's evasion from set bourgeois ideals is closely connected with his redefinition, be it conscious or unconscious, of his own body, defining "decadence" as a deliberate transgression of physical codes.

Deeply bored by the bourgeois ways of life in the French capital, which have a nauseating effect on his feeble physical nature, he buys a manor in a little village, Fontenay-les-Roses, not too far from Paris. Des Esseintes needs more refined sensations for his sophisticated nature than those offered him by the established leisure class. In Fontenay he wants to start a new life "against the grain" of the very values he ran away from. He chooses the pose of the dandy,¹ turning himself into an artifact that mocks the base culture of the masses in the best romantic tradition. Baudelaire and his contemporary Barbey d'Aurevilly rank highly among his idols. Des Esseintes cultivates a narcissistic detachment from anything that could possibly be shared by common people. This deliberate parting from the bourgeois way of life is narrated exclusively from his point of view, with almost no dialogue whatsoever. Thus the reader is invited to wander in the mind of an individual whose tastes soon start to flicker between the bizarre and the pathological. The novel sets off with the burial of its only protagonist in an exquisite house-coffin, which he calls "un désert confortable" and "une arche immobile" (65).

The first half of the novel focuses, however, on des Esseintes's attempt to use his family's degenerate state for his personal artistic purposes. This hereditary disposition is responsible for the hypersensitivity that makes him unique even among his own class: "Décidément, il n'avait aucun espoir de découvrir chez

autrui les mêmes aspirations et les mêmes haines" (65). He turns his back on those unable to understand him, which is also due to the fact that hardly anybody shares his physically refined disposition. Living against the grain means cultivating an existing disadvantage by turning it into a positive, distinguished feature of his own character. Hypersensitivity was, of course, already a typical sign of the self-made "romantic" dandy. The outstanding difference to his *fin-de-siècle* cousin lies in a negative side effect. Whereas the romantic dandy's *mal du siècle* does not necessarily entail physical disease, des Esseintes's "spleen" leads to a functional disorder on the elementary organic level, a fact that is to dominate the second half of the novel.² It is the dragging progress of this disease which constitutes whatever remains of a plot in *A Rebours* and which also causes the rather abrupt ending of the novel. His body's sensitivity to sensual impressions is a distinctive feature of des Esseintes's decadence.

In the first eight chapters, however, we encounter a man who still masters his body and its strange desires. Des Esseintes's sensual longings find their visible expression in his home. To meet with its new owner's refined tastes, the old manor has to undergo a serious redecorating. The character's physical needs and sensual cravings transform the home into an imaginary museum, entailing a constant flicker between corporeal reality and hallucination, i.e., between body and mind. The reader moves from chapter to chapter like a bewildered visitor moving from one room to the next with the only shared thematic element being the refinement of sensual experiences.

Des Esseintes postulates harmony between his artistic visions and the colors a sensitive person sees best. With painstaking precision he depicts the nuances of effects colors have on him. Likewise he judges the effects of light, the arrangement of furniture and, of course, books: the library constitutes the central part of his new house, for reading is the diet of his mind. With no exception to the rule, the ideals des Esseintes seeks are based on refined physical impressions. Even the enumeration of his favorite Latin literature, the so-called decadent style preceding the decline and fall of the Roman empire, finds expression in physical metaphors. He praises "un style . . . d'une couleur précise"

(87), somber verses “sentant le fauve” (89), and compares the language of the fourth century to a rotten corpse:

... perdant ses membres, coulant son pus, gardant à peine, dans toute la corruption de son corps, quelques parties fermes que les chrétiens détachaient afin de les mariner dans la saumure de leur nouvelle langue. (91)

Sensuality is the focal point of his interest; his body is the instrument by which he judges his experiences. Only precise, yet rare, sensual stimulation clearly pointing to synaesthetic experiences set off the half-conscious trains of thought des Esseintes seeks. In several chapters, the narration explicitly comments on his concept of a quasi-mystical bond between all arts. Music, painting and poetry are to be united into one perfect work of art. Physical sensations, the hunt for the beautiful, as expressed in artificial creation are to free him from the boredom he experienced in Paris. Therefore, his comments on contemporary art are of a particular significance for anybody focusing on the relationship between mind and body in this novel. Gustave Moreau's *Salomé* paintings feature prominently among the protagonist's famous works of art. He adores Moreau's abundance of color, his focus on light and shadow on the canvas that adds a touch of the surreal to the painting.³

Even if des Esseintes's delight in aestheticised female cruelty may still be regarded as a last bow to “the dark sight of romanticism” (Praz vii), his emphasis on the interdependency of art to strengthen the physical pleasures is definitely a new tone in the symphony. The very synaestheticism that marks des Esseintes's use of his hereditary physical weakness is projected onto the canvas. His reading of Moreau's *Salomé* paintings does not only reflect his personal cultural sublimation of physical cravings but also suggests an analytical key to its interpretation. Just like anything else that occupies the protagonist's imagination, the paintings appeal to several senses at once: the colors give off scents, their impact affects body and mind likewise. For des Esseintes, Moreau was the first painter to emphasize *Salomé*'s bodily decadence by giving her all the oriental peculiarities European spectators expect, i.e., covering her body with

gold and jewelry causing the paradoxical effect of stressing her nakedness.



Gustave Moreau, *Salomé Dancing Before Herod*, 1876. Oil on canvas, 143.5 x 104.3 cm. © The Armand Hammer Collection, UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, Los Angeles, CA. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

She is at once object and subject displaying ancient cults of fecundity, incarnating everything des Esseintes seeks in women but is afraid to find. He sees in Moreau's rendering of Salomé "une signification phallique" (107), which finds a concrete expression in the lotus she holds in her hands. Des Esseintes reads the medieval symbol of innocence and chastity as a phallic image, stressing the importance of the body furthermore by adding a touch of necrophilia:

Peut-être aussi qu'en armant son énigmatique déesse du lotus vénéré, la peintre avait songé à la danseuse, à la femme mortelle, au Vase souillé, cause de tous les péchés et de tous les crimes; peut-être s'était-il souvenu des rites de la vieille Egypte, des cérémonies sépulcrales de l'embaumement, alors que les chimistes et les prêtres étendent le cadavre de la morte sur un banc de jaspe, lui tirent avec des aiguilles courbes la cervelle par les fosses du nez, les entrailles par l'incision pratiquée dans son flanc gauche, puis avant de lui dorer les ongles et les dents, avant de l'enduire de bitumes et d'essences, lui insèrent, dans les parties sexuelles, pour les purifier, les chastes pétales de la divine fleur. (107)

Death and the female body constitute the fatal network in which men are entangled, the very thing des Esseintes tries to avoid by seeking sexual pleasure in merely regarding Moreau's paintings. His personal lack of power is projected on the perfect body of women covered with gold incarnating male authority by threatening it: an interpretation that is particularly revealing for des Esseintes's views on women.

At the very center of the first half of the novel, the famous fourth chapter extrapolates des Esseintes's aesthetic cravings on the verge of disease: "Il serait bon de placer sur ce tapis quelque chose qui remuât et dont le ton foncé aiguisât la vivacité de ces teintes . . ." (95). Therefore he decides to make a huge turtle crawl over his new carpet. Since the animal's natural color display does not complete the harmony of the carpet, he has its shell covered with gold and precious gems to achieve the desired effect. He is successful, but not for long, since the tormented turtle soon dies on the carpet it was made to perfect. For the first time, des Esseintes's need for sensual perfection shivers between the utterly ridiculous and sheer cruelty.

The same need for synaesthetic perfection drives des Esseintes to another major invention for the refinement of his sensual pleasures. Searching for his opera of the senses, des Esseintes had "une orgue à bouche" made for him (99). This ma-

chine allows him to produce a mixture of different liqueurs with each of them being like a single tone in a melody:

... chaque liqueur correspondait, selon lui, comme goût, au son d'un instrument. Le curaçao sec, par exemple, à la clarinette dont le chant est aigrelet et velouté; le kummel au hautbois dont le timbre sonore nasille; la menthe et l'anisette, à la flûte, tout à la fois sucrée et poivrée, piaulante et douce. . . (99)

The analogy between at least two arts is thus put into the immediate range of his personal sensual practice. Despite his general repugnance of petit bourgeois codes, des Esseintes shares his contemporaries's fascination with technical devices. He is not prejudiced against the promising news positivist science has to offer him. Be it the possibility of making his synaesthetic dreams come true, as in the case of his "orgue à la bouche," or the famous "susteneur," an ancient version of a food processor, used to help his feeble stomach by means of extra-corporeal digestion.

But already this chapter, so rich in the description of extravagant sensual pleasures, finishes on a gloomy physical experience, since the daydreams set off by the "mouth organ" make des Esseintes remember a visit to the barber. The awareness of his own physical being is now expressed by extreme suffering.

Whereas his obvious dandyism links des Esseintes to the late romantic heritage of Brummel, Baudelaire and his contemporary Barbey d'Aurevilly, the use of his own body to display his distinctive features, his elaborate, naturalistic description of pain of the human body as a fragile pleasure hunting machine, situates him likewise in the naturalist vein as it links him to the contemporary discourses of positivist science and medicine.

Unable to wait for an appointment with a fashionable dentist, he settles for the instant, yet tortuous help of a "mécanicien." This working class barber lacks the social prestige of a fashionable bourgeois doctor, whom des Esseintes cannot consult without an appointment. Diseases as social pastime and painful reality coexist in Fontenay just as in the French reality from which des Esseintes fled. The barber as character remains as shallow as the doctors whose advice plays a more important role

in the second part of the novel. In the fourth chapter des Esseintes is still able to use pain, i.e., the memory of it, as an extreme physical sensation for his artistic self-fashioning. The description of his tooth extraction, triggered by the taste of whisky in a way similar to Proust's "madeleine," constantly vacillates between disgust and masochist fascination. The very elaborate style that used to dominate his portrayal of contemporary art, synaesthetic pleasures or decadent Latin literature, is now employed to describe his agony by comparing himself to "une bête qu'on assassine" (102). So the sensual experience of the extracted tooth does not differ, at least stylistically, from his narration about paintings or tapestry: "il soufflait, brandissant au bout de son davier, une dent bleue où pendait du rouge!" (103). Be it pleasure or pain, his own body is constantly used to seek and induce extreme physical sensations. From this point of view, des Esseintes appears far less passive than mainstream criticism tends to see him.

Des Esseintes's extravaganza has often been analyzed in the context of Mario Praz's fundamental study *The Romantic Agony*. Praz states in the very first sentence of his foreword: "The aim of the greater part of this book is a study of Romantic literature (of which the Decadent Movement of the end of the last century is only a development) under one of its most characteristic aspects, that of erotic sensibility" (vii). Yet Huysmans's adoption of this erotic romantic heritage continues his use of the body which I have traced so far.

Physical impotence is one sign of des Esseintes's disgust with the worldly pleasures he turned away from. His body denies the faint delights of sex for sale in a way that functions as a material metaphor for this disgust. In another way, women are directly held responsible for his choice to abandon common mundane delectations: "Une seule passion, la femme eût pu le retenir dans cet universel dédain, qui le poignait, mais celle-là était, elle aussi, usée" (66). Impotent, beyond all physical longings, he turns to Fontenay. There, sexual fantasies are triggered by a physical simulacrum: eating sweets which contain "une goutte d'essence féminine" (145) in the double sense of the word. Again, the mouth is used to supply pleasure.

The women who dominate his memories share interesting features: the same strength and potential cruelty that marks his interpretation of Salomé in Moreau's paintings, reappears in his sexual longings. Des Esseintes consciously looked for male characteristics. With Miss Urania, it is the strong body, "les charmes agiles et puissants d'un mâle" (145), the body of an athlete that fascinates him. He sees his own reflection in her that transcends gender boundaries. During her performance he watches her changing from woman to man. In a complementary movement he feels himself becoming even more effeminate than his degenerate nature already makes him. The physical strength against which he defines himself becomes the sexual stimulus he finds most attractive in women. It is this "échange de sexe" (146) between him and Miss Urania that causes his sexual needs to return. The actual "performance," however, shows Miss Urania to be far more puritan than her athletic body promised. She cannot fulfill des Esseintes's fantasy of female strength and sexual activity. Neither can the ventriloquist, whose machine-like powers fascinate him. His physical impotence ends their affair. Des Esseintes's last sexual fantasy, set off by the use of the aforementioned extraordinary candies is, remarkably enough, connected to a young man whose fragility and beauty fascinates des Esseintes. Against the context I have just tried to sketch, it is less latent homosexuality, but rather the visible, incarnated transgression of fixed gender boundaries that charms him.

Psychoanalytic criticism, for obvious reasons, reads the novel as a proto-Freudian case history, linking des Esseintes's behavior to regressive tendencies and oral fixations. If we contextualise his behavior with contemporary science and philosophy, however, des Esseintes's peculiar tastes belong less to late romantic than these critical approaches suggest. The classic disease that haunts both des Esseintes's body and his mind is hysteria. He sees it everywhere: in his own physical weakness as well as in his artistic surroundings. The powerful Salomé he adores in Moreau's paintings, is not only the incarnation of female phallic power but also "la déesse de l'immortelle Hystérie" (106). The definition of hysteria that can be deduced

from des Esseintes's symptoms does not only foreshadow Freud but mainly reflects the contemporary discussion.

By the time *A Rebours* was published, the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, head of the mental asylum la Salpêtrière, had already published a considerable body of work on hundreds of women diagnosed as "hysterical."⁴ Despite the justified criticism of Charcot's therapeutic work, his greatest achievement for the analysis of this disease is certainly a definition that includes men as well as women. Charcot's works mark the beginning of a psychological understanding of physical lesions. In his career Charcot also wrote more than sixty case histories on hysterical men. He was among the first in clinical psychiatry of the nineteenth century to argue for a definition of hysteria in both sexes, thus finally freeing the disease from the classic uterine etiology that still persisted or was beginning to find its way back into contemporary medicine which defined the female body as inferior on the organic level. On the symptomatic level, however, even Charcot reproduced age-old gender clichés. Whereas women are merely hysterical because of their physical nature, men acquire hysterical lesions through, for example, working accidents. They are not prone to it, as women are.

From the early 1880s until his death in 1893 Charcot published constantly on the subject of hysteria, yet he never gave a congruent theory covering the origins of the disease in both sexes. He considered it to be a neurosis in the strict nineteenth-century sense of the term, i.e., a hereditary neurological disorder which could be triggered by various secondary causes. Despite his insistence on the hereditary, exclusively matrilinear, clearly degenerate and physical etiology of hysteria, Charcot denied that only effeminate, homosexual men could be affected. The majority of his male patients came from working class origin and contradicted the very refined hypersensitivity Huysmans underlines in his protagonist. Whereas Charcot stresses the importance of emotional unrest in the case histories of his female patients, the male ones seem to be affected by visible physical lesions, such as anaesthesia of limbs.

Des Esseintes obviously does not belong to this category, but rather displays clear features of hysterical symptoms in women.

Whereas he seems to underline the old degeneration theory, des Esseintes does cross the gender boundary on the symptomatic level of his hysteria as defined by contemporary scientific discourse. For in the second half of the novel, we face the frail reverse of des Esseintes's sensual refinement. His mind is no longer strong enough to counter the effects of his physical degeneration. The body gets the better of the mind; what used to be a positive feature which distinguished him from his unsophisticated contemporaries turns to disease. "Nerveux" is the term des Esseintes repeatedly uses to describe the reasons for his headaches and recurrent nausea, causing his refusal of all nutrition, and, worst of all, for his frequent nightmarish hallucinations that cease to be the longed for spiritual elevation he came to seek in his self-chosen exile. Creativity, too, stops to be a way of controlling his body's malfunctioning. The synaesthetic impressions with which he deliberately surrounded himself—paintings, tapestry, machines—all begin to turn against him. Suddenly, odors like "frangipane" start to obsess him. His attempts to contain the backlash of sensuality by creative means fail: making perfume proves to be an inappropriate defense against the nausea. The detached pose of dandyism suddenly appears as pathological insomnia, indigestion and anorexia. Strong physical impressions turn into the physical expression of disease.

It is exceptional that, in this peculiar situation, des Esseintes finally turns to a well-established doctor for advice, a doctor who, remarkably enough, does not confirm des Esseintes's personal diagnosis of hysteria. It is only des Esseintes himself who chooses to see himself in this effeminate hysterical frame. He accepts the treatments the doctor suggests and seeks to accelerate this cure with the help of machinery, another outburst of creativity, if you wish. Since his stomach becomes unable to digest normal food, des Esseintes must now turn to the so-called "susteneur," which processes any food he eats. Whereas before he used machines to refine his sensual pleasures, he now tries to restore his health with the help of them. But the effect the machine produces is negligible.⁵

What is indeed striking is the fact that des Esseintes's health is less threatened when he leaves his chosen way of life. His

journey to England, set off by reading Dickens, does not get him further than an English pub in Paris, but there he eats and drinks heartily for the very first time. And it is this experience of food and atmosphere that finally convinces him *not* to make the journey, for his expectations could only be disappointed by reality, just as his sexual memories already proved. Only the mind can sufficiently fulfill the longings of the body, but it is physical gratification that makes all the difference.

With his symptoms getting worse, des Esseintes finally gives in to the doctor's advice and decides to give up Fontenay. The decadent pose, assumed to give his body the exquisite sensual indulgence it appeared to need, has to be relinquished since his truly decadent body rebelled against it.



Notes

¹ I call it a pose since a closer analysis shows that des Esseintes's "living against the grain" includes the set codes of dandyism as depicted by Baudelaire and Barbey d'Aurevilly, a fact that has to be neglected for brevity's sake here.

² Some critics, including Hiltrud Gnüg, chose to regard des Esseintes as a mock-dandy.

³ For Huysmans, being as much a novelist as an art critic, Moreau succeeded in using literary techniques in his paintings: "cet art qui franchissait les limites de la peinture, empruntait à l'art d'écrire ses plus subtiles évocations" (110).

⁴ In recent years, medical historians as well as literary critics have shown an increasing interest in Charcot's works which find its

outlet in a tremendous body of critical work. For an overview of “new hysteria studies,” see Marc S. Micale’s *Approaching Hysteria. Disease and its Interpretations* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995).

⁵ See Huysmans’s chapters XV and XVI for a discussion of the “susteneur.”

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BODY, BLINDNESS, AND RE-MEMORY: THE STRUGGLE FOR A POST-COLONIAL UNDERSTANDING OF IDENTITY

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Identity quests are hardly a new literary topic. Neither are novels of independence where the struggle against the oppressor and the desire for nationhood and self-determination are in focus. Independence for most French speaking West African colonies came in 1960. Jean-Marie Adiaffi's novel *La carte d'identité* was published in 1980, twenty years later, but still seeming to focus on liberation from the oppressor. His peers criticized his book for its thematic regression, as if he was still in need of the colonizer in order to write, as if he was unable to think and write independently of the colonial paradigm. Upon further study, Adiaffi's novel does not simply replicate earlier ones. Instead it charts a path of liberation from the angst of post-colonial identity. In an interview he says that while "on croyait avec les indépendances arriver au bout du tunnel, on va s'apercevoir qu'on va rentrer dans un autre tunnel, dont on ne connaît pas la fin" ("Interview" with Riesz 31). In this paper, I will discuss Adiaffi's vision of the light at the end of the second tunnel. To get there, I will retrace the path of Mélédouman, the Prince of Bettié and protagonist in *La carte d'identité*.

The book begins with a demonstration of *l'indigénat*, a provision where during colonial rule, the Commandant could stop, try, and convict a person for any reason. In the case of Mélédouman, only after he has been beaten and hauled in for questioning is he given a justification for the abuse and detainment: the Prince does not have his ID card on him. The

Commandant tries to impress its importance, “ce n'est pas un simple papier. C'est toute ta vie” (29). For the colonizer, the written word authenticates existence, claiming colonization occurred because of a void ultimately caused by the lack of a written language. “Vous n'avez même pas pu inventer un langage, un signe pour écrire votre nom, conserver votre mémoire. Vous êtes un peuple analphabète, un peuple sans écriture, donc sans mémoire et par conséquent sans histoire” (34). The natives were simply uneducated children who should be appreciative that the French “Vous a fait sortir des ténèbres, pour vous guider sur votre chemin noir avec sa lumière blanche” (33). Without the light of French philosophy, mathematics, science, art, and medicine, where would the native be?

For Méléđouman, his blood, his heritage and his scars are his ID card. The stories of his ancestors, who worked and lived the same land, are written in blood on his body, rather than in textbooks or encyclopedias. What *has* been transliterated into French, Méléđouman's name, has lost its meaning completely. The French pronunciation gives the meaning “Je n'ai pas de nom” or “on a falsifié mon nom” (3). According to Adiaffi, when pronounced correctly, it means “j'ai un nom” (“Interview” with Riesz 29). Intonation and pitch are all that separate readers from understanding this double signification, as Adiaffi's clarification does not occur in the novel itself, but is found in an interview. According to the white colonizers, the people of Bettié do not have a name or a language, but according to the Prince, *in his own (spoken) words*, he has both.

Méléđouman uses the occasion to “(règle) son compte” (Adiaffi 36) with the colonizer. He tells his foe that if a prisoner in handcuffs and shackles can look him straight in the eyes, then the prisoner is still a free man. Nothing else can touch him for he has moral and spiritual force while the commandant merely has brute force. Destroy the soul, deny the culture and history of a people: these acts would “déracine.” “*Que vaut un peuple qui ne sait plus interpréter ses propres signes? Quelle force morale, quelle solidité peut avoir un peuple qui a perdu la signification de ses propres mythes, de ses propres symboles? Un étranger à*

lui-même" (39). His cultural roots grow deep, like the most tenacious of weeds. Can the colonizer really destroy all of them?

The Commandant, exasperated, calls an end to the interrogation-turned-debate and has his guards bring the Prince to the "cellule de vérité," the famed prison cell where confessions are beaten out of the prisoners, regardless of their guilt. He tells his guards to beat Mélédouman until he listens to reason. "Cet imbécile de raisonner, de rebelle nègre, s'il était innocent, maintenant il ne l'est plus" (45). Mélédouman's "unlawfulness" is in not accepting his position in society. In an odd moment of empathy, the Commandant begins to question what he could do to help Mélédouman, "un nègre d'intelligence exceptionnelle" (45) believing that, in a different time and in a different place, they would have been friends.

At the time the Commandant, now in his capacity as judge and jury, calls for the first set of plaintiffs for the first trial, he gets dizzy and loses consciousness. While recuperating at home, a more vicious "cercle" intervenes in his place. When he returns and court resumes a week later, he is shocked by Mélédouman's appearance. His guards had continued to beat Mélédouman, causing him to become blind. This was not the intended result of the Commandant's order "matez-le." He wonders:

Ses yeux, ses beaux yeux perçants, ne verront-ils plus jamais la lumière, le monde, sa beauté, ses merveilles, ses fleurs, ses cascades? . . . Mon Dieu, quelle misère! Cette nuit dans laquelle Mélédouman se trouve plongé! . . . Que peuvent coûter des yeux? . . . Quel est le prix de la nuit? Quel est le prix de la lumière? . . . Comment réparer l'irréparable? (58–9)

Flustered, he asks Mélédouman if he has found his ID card. The Prince asks how that could be possible given his current condition. The Commandant provisionally releases Mélédouman for a week to find his ID card, adding "Sait-on jamais, peut-être avec ta carte d'identité tu retrouveras à nouveau l'usage de tes yeux perdus!" (59).

The blindness inflicted upon Mélédouman is figurative, as well as literal. "Seule me guette, patiente, la mort. Je suis au bord

de mon cercueil, de ma tombe. Tout m'abandonne, mon âme, mon esprit, mon histoire, mon passé. J'ai tout perdu: ma mémoire, mes souvenirs" (66). Since his story is also the collective story of his people, he is blind not only to himself, but to them as well. He can no longer remember, and thus interpret, their cultural codes. The strength of the Prince's moral convictions which he once contrasted with the Commandant's brute force no longer sustain him. The loss of his memory and thus his identity serve as a symbolic death, leaving physical death as the only part of his future of which he is certain. His amnesia leads him to accept the significance of his paper ID card.

Méléđouman calls to his ancestors for a guiding hand, since he can no longer see the trace of his existence in the symbolic footsteps left in the sand. He receives some assistance from his seven-year-old granddaughter, Ebah Ya. She accompanies him on his search, advising him of potholes in the road, but she is too young to be of much real guidance. Just prior to his release from jail, he asks her to bring him a mirror. She returns, dragging the largest one she could find. Both she and the mirror temporarily replace the ID card: his identity is proven through his reflection in the mirror, "je me mire, donc j'existe" (126), and seen by his granddaughter, herself a partial reflection. In traditional African cultures, a person without reflection or shadow has no soul, therefore does not exist (Gallimore 45). Holding the object under his arm or carrying it on his back and knowing that others can see his reflection reassures him for a while even though he intermittently asks for verification. The mirror functions as a symbol of the burden of proving not only his identity, but also his existence.

As suggested by Rangira Béatrice Gallimore, Méléđouman's journey is an initiation into "le monde agni." I would argue it is a twofold initiation, for the protagonist as well as for the implied reader, the culpable Westerner. The first stop brings him to the artisans' community, called "le quartier des génies," named for the divine genii that inspire, motivate, and empower the artisans and for the genius it takes to interpret the divine signs and create a work of art. As he talks with an elder, he touches the sculptures around him, trying to interpret their shapes. "Tout ici est symbole

et s'enracine dans la grande et belle mythologie akan" (78). "Est-ce un fragment de ma carte d'identité que tu tisses, que tu sculptes, que tu forges, que tu modèles, que tu cisèles? . . . Tu es en train de lutter contre ta mort, ma mort, notre mort" (79). His ID card, though, is not among the cherished shapings, despite its elevation to fetishized object. While he re-discovers the art, he is still left in the dark and forced to move along in his search.

At the Catholic Mission, Méléđouman and Ebah Ya find two worlds, two powers in collision. The priest is in a trance, possessed by "les génies," for having stolen the most sacred of talking drums, the Kinian Pli. "La guerre sacrée était donc déclarée" (86). After confessing to his sins, the priest asks the spirits for forgiveness, vowing to give up his god for theirs. The frenetic music crescendos, becoming such an overpowering force that the priest experiences vertigo and faints. Exhausted and foaming at the mouth, he is carried off to his quarters and his statues are in turn stolen as the others are recuperated.

Père Joseph's attitude after his recovery demonstrates the hypocrisy of the "mission civilisatrice," of Christianity, and of the ephemeral nature of the admission. He takes on the persona of a generous and charitable person, then illustrates the fact that he is not. Méléđouman questions the other's reasoning, using the priest's own biblical rhetoric against him: "Aimez-vous les uns les autres comme je vous ai aimés. Aimez votre prochain comme vous-même. Qu'en est-il à Bettié? . . . Vous conseillez l'amour aux Nègres alors que vous les méprisez" (95). Père Joseph chooses not to directly respond to the accusations, for he sees the colonized at times as children who are incapable of truly understanding "the light" of the Holy Trinity.

Just before leaving, Méléđouman inquires about his ID card. The priest suggests Méléđouman get a duplicate ID made, or even a new ID with a new identity altogether. While the "duplicata" (96) would satisfy the Commandant, it would not alleviate the burden the Prince feels over his lost identity. He would still have to go looking for it, despite what he has re-learned, in order to be at peace with himself.

In many traditional African societies, mind and body are one. With the French colonial schooling, students were distanced

from their culture not only by the lessons learned, but by the language itself. For instance, the expression “white as snow” had no meaning for many Africans. “Learning, for a colonial child, became a cerebral activity and not an emotionally felt experience” (Ngugi 17). When Mélédouman passes by the school, a school-child trying to escape the punishment for speaking Agni in class runs into Mélédouman, almost knocking him over. “Cette belle école, qui aurait dû apporter la lumière, apporte la nuit, car on veut utiliser la science . . . comme moyen de domination, ou en d’autres termes, répandre, étendre l’obscurantisme sur le monde” (102). Through Mélédouman’s discussion with the teacher on the subject of language, we hear the voice of such writers as Ngugi wa Thiong’o in *Decolonizing the Mind*. Language is a living entity, one that grows and changes with a culture. Through these developments, it enriches itself. It does not need to be written down to be a vessel of communication and cultural significance. In disciplining a student for inscribing himself in his own culture, the child becomes estranged from himself as Mélédouman is now, having attested to his own cultural ID card to the Commandant and suffered the consequences.

Mélédouman’s first objective was to go home, the most logical place for the ID card to be. The location of his house seems illusory. Things have not been quite as they seem all along. The school, for example, was in the “quartier indigène” rather than in the “quartier des Blancs,” where it usually is. This new world confuses him:

Quel est ce monde dans lequel je suis tombé? Un monde de cauchemar. Un monde fou de fous. Un monde où toutes les lois sont renversées, où tout est possible à chaque second. L’état zéro de la raison, de la vie. Un monde sans repères. On ne peut plus se séparer ni dans l'espace ni dans le temps. (122–3)

When he arrives at the site where his house should be, it is gone. One neighbor’s house has no roof, while the other has no walls. He encounters a woman claiming to be his widow, yet they do not recognize each other. She runs off screaming for help, believing him to be a ghostly spirit, returned from the dead. Mé-

Mélédouman begins to seriously doubt himself and his existence. He heads to the cemetery to find his tomb. For reassurance, he asks Ebah Ya to describe what she sees in the mirror. “Qui suis-je? . . . Quelle est mon identité?” (130). His fears are not finally assuaged until he visits the cemetery and verifies that his tomb or headstone does not exist.

Mélédouman believes his last chance to find his ID card is at the “maison sacrée du trône.” His final search occurs on Anan Ya, or *Vendredi sacré*, “C'est l'occasion annuelle donnée aux rois et à la cour de rappeler à la conscience du peuple toutes les connaissances accumulées depuis la fondation du royaume à nos jours” (138). He finds himself an observer, rather than participant because of his alienation. Again he asks his ancestors for help in removing the invisible chains that keep him from locating his identity and in combating the injustice he has witnessed.

[A] quelle page de notre grand livre vierge ouvert se trouveront les mots: liberté, libération et justice?
Premiers mots de ma carte d'identité.

Nom: Libération
Prénom: Liberté
Fils de: Justice
Et de: Dignité
Né à: Création - Invention - Découvertes
Age: Science-Lumière (146)

Upon Mélédouman's return to the prison, the Commandant greets the Prince with a false sense of respect. The police had his ID card all along. Quickly, the Commandant explains he made a mistake, as if in saying “on le reconnaît” (152), the guilt and responsibility associated with the terrors inflicted on Mélédouman will be quickly forgiven and forgotten. “Reconnait” means not only to recognize the ID as Mélédouman's, thereby giving him a certain amount of legitimacy, but also to acknowledge the colonizer's unjust role in the affair. Needless to say, Mélédouman is incredulous.

At dusk of the end of the seventh day, he is finally able to rest “en regardant dans son propre miroir, [il] retrouve sa propre image, son image pure, chaste, sans falsification” (159). He calls

to his mythical ancestor, stating that today, their identity has been recovered and with it, his eyesight: he has arrived home. He has emerged from the other end of the tunnel with a new awareness of himself and his people, ready to leave the past behind and move towards a new beginning.

In an interview with Bernard Magnier, Adiaffi proposes that liberation for the African and for Africa will only come after the “mosaic of nations” (105) becomes a United States of Africa. Otherwise, exploitation will continue for no one single African country can effectively enter into the global market and be a viable force against or alongside Western countries. Mélédouman represents, for the author, a man he wishes he could be, “un intellectuel revenu dans son pays et parfaitement réintégré” (106). This makes sense if he is referring to Mélédouman the product of African teachings, French schooling, colonial wrath, and re-memory. Part of how the author consciously tries to demonstrate his own re-integration is by means of narrative technique, combining the African oral tradition with the French language, “écrire en français mais avec la langue africaine” (104). J. Michael Dash in his article “Writing the Body” says “Identity, whether collective or individual, remains latent unless a system of signification is established” and “The subject cannot be written into existence unless the group is understood” (612). For Adiaffi, writing in French establishes a new chance for African cultures to survive, by being understood rather than ignored.

Mélédouman’s physical and mental journey from darkness to light demonstrates the difficult conditions of the confirmation of identity. His amnesia is symbolic of the “cultural amnesia” that separated “corps” and “esprit” during colonization and left the “liberated” to wonder about the future. That he is blind reinforces his “piège” of existence. Paradoxically, it is through the written word, bequeathed to him by a commandant, that Adiaffi is able to assert a post-postcolonial or rather Afrocentric cultural identity to the West.



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LA BLESSURE DANS L'ŒUVRE DE SERGE DOUBROVSKY

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Le visage le plus exposé de Serge Doubrovsky est sans doute celui d'un écrivain conduit à introduire le terme d'autofiction à l'occasion de la parution de *Fils* en 1977, inaugurant une série de textes placés sous le signe de la création de soi par l'écriture. A l'origine, l'autofiction correspond à l'hypothèse improbable envisagée par le théoricien de l'autobiographie en France, Philippe Lejeune, alors qu'il réfléchit aux cas possibles de combinaisons entre le registre romanesque et le registre autobiographique. Il s'agit de la possibilité qu'un héros de roman ait le même nom que l'auteur, concept qui séduit d'emblée Serge Doubrovsky qui travaille à l'écriture de *Fils*: récit à la première personne du singulier, *Fils* met en scène un héros dénommé Serge Doubrovsky. D'une part, l'identité du nom propre est partagée par le héros-narrateur-personnage, l'auteur assurant qu'il s'est servi de matériaux premiers authentiquement biographiques. De l'autre, le paratexte doubrovskien incite à reconnaître dans cette œuvre une fiction et non une autobiographie, le "fiction" d'autofiction désignant le travail de l'écriture, la mise en forme littéraire:

Autobiographie? Non, c'est un privilège réservé aux importants de ce monde, au soir de leur vie, et dans un beau style. Fiction d'événements et de faits strictement réels; si l'on veut autofiction, d'avoir confié le langage d'une aventure à l'aventure du langage, hors sagesse et hors syntaxe du roman traditionnel ou nouveau. (*Fils Prière d'insérer*)

Notre propos ici n'est pas de rendre compte des très féconds bénéfices littéraires que tirera l'écrivain de cette opportunité mise au jour par Philippe Lejeune. Plutôt que de considérer la série d'autofictions inaugurée par *Fils*, dont on a souligné l'aspect profondément novateur et ludique, nous souhaiterions revenir sur l'œuvre qui l'a précédée. *La dispersion*, parue en 1969, qui revient sur la période de la guerre et sur la blessure de la persécution, a souvent été isolée de l'œuvre à venir. Certes, sur le plan générique, ce texte demeure un roman autobiographique, évidence que Serge Doubrovsky lui-même se plaît à rappeler. Il s'agit d'un texte composé en grande partie d'extraits des textes officiels qui ont régi la situation des Juifs pendant l'Occupation nazie en France, montage qui nous permet d'imaginer la somme considérable de travail de recherche qu'aurait effectué l'écrivain au lendemain de la guerre. Au-delà de cette appartenance revendiquée au registre de la fiction, ce texte semble contenir en germe les fondements du projet autofictionnel. N'y retrouve-t-on pas déjà quelques-unes des scènes constitutives de la mythologie personnelle de l'écrivain? Ou, pour reprendre le terme de Jean Ricardou, la constitution d'un biotexte, soit:

Avec la biographie, du moins en apparence, les événements s'imposent censément au geste qui inscrit. Ou, si l'on préfère, le fonctionnement est de l'ordre de l'expression ou de la représentation. Avec le biotexte, les éléments sont requis par l'acte d'écriture. Ou si l'on aime mieux, le mécanisme est du registre de la textualisation.

(28)

Le moi enfoui

La dispersion s'ouvre sur une séparation. Le narrateur—dont on sait très peu de choses en dehors des paroles qu'il profère, des pulsions, des sensations, du magma de pensées intérieures qui sous-tendent ses paroles—est quitté par la jeune femme qu'il aime, alors qu'elle est partie rejoindre l'homme qu'elle doit épouser. Nous pénétrons dans l'espace mental de ce tiers-exclu du triangle amoureux où les sensations présentes s'articulent à des souvenirs lointains. La blessure amoureuse fait resurgir une

autre souffrance: celle de la persécution nazie qu'il a vécue en tant que Juif pendant l'Occupation. D'emblée, le récit d'enfance vient court-circuiter le récit amoureux: "C'est vrai, avec toi, d'un seul coup, ça s'est rouvert. D'un seul coup, je suis tombé dans le trou béant, vingt-cinq ans de vide, jusqu'au fond de moi" (27).

L'axe temporel est ainsi détruit. Les événements de la brève histoire de ce couple nous sont livrés pêle-mêle, de manière dé-chronologisée, suggérant par là que la vie n'est saisissable que par fragments disséminés, séquences répétitives, comme les détails de leur première rencontre, non loin de la Place de la Concorde. La femme—une étrangère vivant à Paris—désignant l'Hôtel Crillon et lui demande "Qu'est-ce que c'est là-bas?":

Pas un son ne passe, ma gorge s'étrangle, aspiré, disparu, je n'ai pu m'en empêcher, comme un haut-le-coeur, une colique, au fond, en bas, dans le remuement sourd des viscères, la lourde nuit des organes, vertige, j'ai battu l'air de la main d'un grand geste circulaire. (35)

Cadre de la rencontre amoureuse, la Place de la Concorde est le rappel douloureux de la période de l'Occupation au cours de laquelle la capitale fut livrée pendant quatre ans à l'autorité nazie. La douleur lancinante du narrateur réactive celle du jeune adolescent, témoin stupéfait des déploiements militaires de l'Occupant, du martèlement des bottes nazies et du drapeau de la Svastika flottant au-dessus de l'Hôtel Crillon. C'est de ce lieu vide, de ce lieu de l'humiliation monstrueuse que le narrateur écrit. Les deux récits discontinus s'entremêlent et il devient difficile pour le lecteur de dénouer l'émotion amoureuse de celle du souvenir d'enfance, comme si la mémoire profonde de cette période menaçait toujours de refaire surface, toujours sous une forme fragmentée, dispersée.

Le moi humilié

Le port de l'étoile, la désignation comme juif, imposés par l'autorité vichyste, sont vécus de manière d'autant plus traumatisante que la famille du narrateur appartient à la génération de l'assimilation. Faut-il rappeler que depuis 1791, le Juif, devenu

citoyen français de confession israélite, n'a pas en effet à se définir comme Juif dans la mesure où la catégorie de "Juif français" n'a aucune existence juridique. Avec Vichy et la mise en place d'un non-état qui abolit l'Etat républicain méritocratique, c'est la première fois qu'est reproblermatisée en France l'identité juive. De fait, le modèle français d'intégration tel qu'il a été produit par la Révolution française est brusquement rendu nul et non avenu:

Devenu d'un seul coup objet de honte, de haine ou, pire, de pitié. Comme une marchandise dans une vitrine, brusquement marqué, étiqueté. Petite ardoise carrée, avec le prix griffonné à la craie, fiché dans la volaille, à l'étal, au milieu du bréchet. Là. Un doigt ricaneur, fer rouge, sur la pochette de la veste, en haut de la poitrine, à gauche. En plein cœur JUIF Au centre des six pointes bordées d'un trait noir, sur fond d'or éclatant, les lettres de jais se contorsionnent. Je n'ai plus de nom. Plus rien. Un mot. Quatre lettres à la gothique. Vidé d'un seul coup jusqu'à l'os. Nettoyé de ma chair. L'intimité chaude et moite qui circule des pieds à la tête, sang, lymphé, moi, asséchée, évaporée. Quatre lettres qui se tordent et grimacent entre les murs de l'hexagone tracés à l'encre de Chine. Sur toute la façade, au faîte du Crillon, tournoyant sans fin sur elle-même, battant de ses ailes courtes, enivrée de fureur, la Svastika, sur le drapeau flottant déployée, est descendue, par une longue retombée, un long périple étouffant. . . (128)

La marque du signe distinctif, l'étoile jaune, est la première étape d'un processus de dégradation du corps qui trouvera sa radicalisation dans les camps de la mort. La blessure de l'étoile renvoie à la "plaie au ventre" d'une France divisée par la ligne de démarcation. Comme le souligne Annette Wievorka, l'une des grandes difficultés qu'eurent à affronter les Juifs de France victimes des persécutions fut celle de concevoir qu'ils puissent de nouveau être perçus comme appartenant à une collectivité juive, qu'ils puissent être envisagés comme membres d'une même communauté ou nation. Dans le prolongement direct de

l'Emancipation, le Juif français a en effet aspiré de tout cœur à une citoyenneté française pleine et sans concessions. Une logique impliquant au bout du compte la négation de tout particularisme juif. Un particularisme dont la famille du narrateur s'est rapidement départie grâce à un embourgeoisement qui fait du père un “transfuge des taudis aux beaux quartiers” (101). Sa présence persiste toutefois dans certaines parties de la famille habitant dans l'est de la ville. C'est le cas de l'oncle Mordka et des siens qui viennent rappeler l'origine juive, l'appartenance à un monde passé:

Accourus, avides, des bas quartiers, des ruelles malodorantes, du côté des Halles ou de la Bastille, ou de pavillons de la banlieue est, lépreux, dans la région des usines, pour un coup d'oeil sur une belle situation, avec wc privés, pour un bon morceau et un verre, pour une parole aussi de secours et de réconfort, le Père, qui avait fait son chemin. (104)

L'identité juive est ainsi polarisée entre celle—toujours péjorée—du nouveau venu, de l'immigrant et celle récemment acquise du Français, représenté par le narrateur, produit d'une assimilation exemplaire:

... j'étais premier en français en classe quelquefois second ou troisième mais pas souvent toujours tableau d'honneur félicitations du conseil de discipline prix d'excellence et si c'est vrai que mon père parle avec un accent étranger il s'était engagé volontaire avant même la fin août 14 et on ne peut pas en dire autant des milliers et milliers de bons aryens de bonne famille planqués alors dans tous les recoins de la France. (184)

C'est à l'école, lieu de l'intégration par excellence, que le narrateur est pour la première fois victime d'une agression antisémite. L'instituteur, Monsieur Prunier, consultant le registre des absences, interroge un à un ses élèves sur leur appartenance religieuse:

Berthier: “catholique.” Dumoulin: “catholique.” Legros: “catholique.” Letellier: “protestant.” Fausse note. Prunier redresse la tête, le regarde: “calviniste? luthérien?”

Letellier bredouille: "cal...viniste." "Bien." Rosenblum? De nouveau, silence. "Sans." Les yeux de Prunier sont devenus tout pointus: "sans quoi?" "Sans religion." Prunier a eu un rictus, comme s'il allait mordre, et puis il a pincé les lèvres. En écrivant dans le registre, il a psalmodié d'une voix de fausset: "Rosenblum, sans religion." Quand j'ai dit "sans" à mon tour, Prunier a demandé: "c-e-n-t?" Vaguelette de rires dans la classe, le garçon d'étage a pouffé. On le murmure, on le susurre, chuchotement de bouche à oreille, frisellis de sons ailés: *ils... (215)*

Scène primitive de "l'agression," cette scène renvoie à l'immense répertoire des topoï de l'itinéraire biographique du Juif moderne. Il s'agit d'une sorte de "scène obligée," telle que la définit Bruno Vercier à propos du récit d'enfance:

Du rapprochement et de la superposition de toutes les autobiographies se dégage une sorte de récit idéal dont chaque œuvre fournit une réalisation particulière. Cette série, plus ou moins complète selon les cas, serait à peu près la suivante: "Je suis né, Mon père et ma mère, La Maison, Le reste de la famille, Le premier souvenir, Le langage, Le monde extérieur, Les animaux, La mort, Les livres, La vocation, L'école, Le sexe, La fin de l'enfance. (1033)

Il est intéressant de noter qu'il s'agit là d'un des rares épisodes de *La dispersion* qui ne soit pas repris dans l'œuvre ultérieure, notamment dans *Laissé pour conte* (1999) qui revient largement sur la période. Même si nous avons affaire ici à un texte qui ne revendique pas une stricte adhésion à la réalité, cette scène nous conduit par sa trop évidente exemplarité à soupçonner qu'elle relève plus d'une reconstruction fantasmatique que d'un souvenir authentiquement autobiographique. Non que le narrateur ait été confronté à la nécessité de créer, d'inventer une scène d'agression. De telles scènes sont nombreuses dans le récit et le référent n'est que trop réel. La construction de cette scène obéirait néanmoins à un désir de retrouver du "déjà-dit," répondant par là

à l'attente du lecteur. Un autre souvenir, récurrent dans l'œuvre ultérieure, viendra néanmoins réhabiliter l'école dans sa fonction d'intégration et d'épanouissement. Il s'agit de la cérémonie où le narrateur reçoit sous le regard ému de ses parents le premier prix de philosophie d'un concours général au lendemain de la guerre.

La blessure originelle

Dans l'entreprise de mise à nu qui fonde l'œuvre doubrovskienne, l'observation du corps participe d'un regard lucide et impudique. Dans *La dispersion* déjà, le narrateur observe le sien avec le retrait que confère l'analyse, hyperconscience née et imposée par l'agression dans le corps réel. En effet, le port de l'étoile jaune est la métaphore d'un autre type de blessure, celle de la circoncision. La découverte du sexe circoncis plonge le narrateur dans un sentiment de profonde étrangeté à lui-même. Vécue comme une vraie malédiction, elle est la ligne de démarcation entre le moi et ce qui l'entoure, la frontière irréductible entre le juif et le non-juif: "c'est LA, identité, voilà ma carte, non, pas la truquée, la vraie, celle qui est sous, taillée à même, au couteau, au bistouri, gravée, sous les bandelettes dévidées, au bout, ce qui reste, après cinq mille ans, après des milliards de morts, quand tout a été broyé, concassé" (261). Source d'inquiétude, elle est le rappel d'une identité assignée et non désirée, subie dans une passivité absolue:

Marié à perpète, avec bénédiction de la police et de la milice. A qui? C'est le pompon, le bouquet. A un fantôme, a un fantoche. A RIEN. Aryen. Jéhovah, Yahvé, Elohim, Adonaï? Connais pas. De nom, à peine. De loin. Comme Jésus-Christ ou Confucius. On fraye pas ensemble. On se fréquente pas. J'EN AI RIEN A FOUTRE. (252)

Parce qu'elle se situe à la croisée du réel et de l'imaginaire, la circoncision cristallise des fantasmes récurrents. A plusieurs reprises, le narrateur se voit contraint de montrer son sexe à un examinateur imaginaire:

Et si soudain, surgis dans le hall, ou même pendant le film, lumières, on arrête, vérification. Aux chiottes. En

rang d'oignons. En file indienne. les zigues. le type se penche. Il y fourre le nez. Pas besoin de loupe. A l'oeil nu. C'est là. Baissez le grimpant. C'est connu. Ça se fait. Tous les jours. Et le slip. LA. Aux feux de la rampe. En plein projecteur. Le type ricane. Pincé. L'ALLIANCE. La sainte alliance à la pine. La bague. Oublié de la retirer. Peux pas. (250)

Toujours dévalorisé, le sexe circoncis est pour le narrateur le plus sûr moyen d'être conduit à la mort: "DOS AU MUR contre les carreaux vernissés pour la fusillade des yeux le flic déclic un geste à faire un mot à dire poser culotte verdict sentence arrêt arrestation station de chemin de fer wagons à bestiaux destination inconnue" (246). L'incision du signe sacré dans la chair marque chez le narrateur une forme de désolidarisation radicale entre le corps et l'esprit. Parce que celle-ci est vécue comme un manque à jamais surmontable, à aucun moment le narrateur n'envisage de se réconcilier avec cette marque de la judéité qui reste associée à la persécution, contrairement aux personnages autofictifs de Philip Roth par exemple. Si les deux auteurs ont en commun une longue fréquentation des frontières troubles de l'autobiographie et de la fiction, leur rapport à la judéité demeure fort éloigné. Ainsi, dans une œuvre récente de Philip Roth, la circoncision est l'objet d'une sorte de réhabilitation:

La circoncision établit aussi clairement que possible que tu es ici et non là, que tu es dehors et non dedans . . . et aussi que tu es à moi et non à eux. Il n'y a pas de moyen d'y échapper: tu entres dans l'histoire par mon histoire et par moi. . . . La circoncision donne figure (congé) au rêve matriciel de l'existence dans le magnifique état de l'innocente préhistoire, la séduisante idylle de la vie naturelle, libre de tous les rituels conçus par l'homme. La lourde main des valeurs humaines tombe sur toi dès l'origine, marquant ton sexe pour se l'approprier. Dans la mesure où l'on invente ses propres significations, en même temps qu'on incarne la diversité de ses moi, telle est la signification que je propose pour ce rite. Je ne suis pas de ces juifs qui veulent retracer leur histoire aux pa-

triarches, ou même à l'Etat moderne; la relation de mon moi juif à leur nous juif n'a rien de si direct ou de si libre que Henry souhaite la mienne, et il n'est pas non plus dans mon intention de simplifier cette relation en brandissant comme drapeau le prépuce de mon enfant. (180-1)

On pourrait également citer "Circonfession" où Jacques Derrida accorde une place fondamentale à la cérémonie indéterminée de sa circoncision. Dans cette sorte de "confession" au statut éminemment problématique, l'écrivain-philosophe tente d'élaborer à nouveau cet événement dans ce qu'il appelle une sorte de "mémoire sans représentation":

... et depuis des années je tourne en rond, cherchant à prendre à témoin non pour me voir être vu mais pour me remembrer autour d'un seul événement, j'accumule au grenier, mon "sublime," documents, iconographie, notes, les savantes et les naïves, les récits de rêves ou les dissertations philosophiques, la transcription appliquée de traités encyclopédiques, sociologiques, historiques, psychanalytiques dont je ne ferai jamais rien, sur les circoncisions dans le monde, et la juive, et l'arabe, et les autres, et l'excision, en vue de ma seule circoncision, la circoncision de moi, l'unique dont je sais bien qu'elle eut lieu, une seule fois, on me l'a dite et je la vois mais je me soupçonne toujours d'avoir cultivé, parce que je suis circoncis, ego cultive, une fantastique affabulation.

(Jacques Derrida 263)

On peut mesurer la distance qui sépare ici les deux écrivains. Chez Doubrovsky la circoncision, réduite à une cérémonie tribale d'initiation, semble avoir à jamais brisé la cohérence et l'unité intérieures. Le stade de la blessure narcissique n'est ainsi jamais dépassé. C'est dans ce fossé entre le corps et l'esprit, que le récit de *La dispersion* semble se déployer, dénonçant l'illusion d'un lien spontané entre l'homme et son corps.

La judéité du père spirituel

La critique a beaucoup souligné l'importance qu'a pu avoir Sartre pour l'écrivain Doubrovsky, évoquant un puissant rapport de filiation qu'il n'a jamais cherché à dissimuler et qui s'affirme tout au long du *Livre Brisé*:

Il ne me domine pas. IL M'ILLUMINE. Sartre, pour moi, n'est pas n'importe quel grand écrivain. C'est moi, c'est ma vie. Il me vise au cœur, il me concerne en mon centre. Corneille, Racine, après trois siècles, ne sont plus personne. Des œuvres sans auteur, des mythes. J'adore en eux des fantômes. Proust, ses duchesses, déjà enterrés avant ma naissance. J'ai remâché avec joie sa madeleine, je lui dois d'infinis bonheurs tardifs. Mais Sartre. Ses livres ont jalonné mon existence. (71-2)

Une étude de Marie Miguet-Ollagnier, "La 'saveur Sartre' du *Livre brisé*," nous éclaire en particulier sur la surimpression de leurs romans familiaux et la reprise par Doubrovsky de topoï autobiographiques sartriens. Nombreuses sont les correspondances qui établissent une filiation avec l'œuvre autobiographique du père spirituel notamment entre *Les mots* et *Le livre brisé*. La longue fréquentation de l'œuvre de Sartre ne pose aucun doute mais il est légitime de s'interroger sur la résonance qu'a pu avoir un texte comme *Réflexions sur la question juive*, cet opuscule paru au lendemain de la guerre et dont l'œuvre et le paratexte de Serge Doubrovsky ne font aucune mention. Si l'on admet aujourd'hui le caractère largement dépassé de ce texte de Sartre, il faut rappeler qu'il eut en son temps un impact considérable. Réflexion sur la condition existentielle, épistémologique et ontologique du Juif dans sa "situation objective," il en propose une du point de vue de l'agresseur. Le Juif en tant que bouc émissaire, personification du diable en qui se concentrent toutes les craintes et hantises de l'antisémite, esprit médiocre et réactionnaire. L'aspect le plus problématique de l'analyse de Sartre concerne le fait que, s'interrogeant sur le contenu de l'identité du Juif dans la sphère sociale, il ne lui reconnaît aucune spécificité:

Qu'est-ce donc qui conserve à la communauté juive un semblant d'unité? Pour répondre à cette question, il faut revenir à l'idée de situation. Ce n'est ni leur passé, ni leur religion, ni leur sol qui unissent les fils d'Israël. Mais s'ils ont un lien commun, s'ils méritent tous le nom de Juif, c'est qu'ils ont une situation commune de Juif, c'est-à-dire qu'ils vivent au sein d'une communauté qui les tient pour Juifs. (81)

Dénudé de traits distinctifs, le Juif est réduit à n'être qu'un homme que les autres prennent pour Juif: "Nous venons de voir, en effet, que, contrairement à une opinion répandue, ce n'est pas le caractère juif qui provoque l'antisémitisme mais, au contraire, que c'est l'antisémite qui crée le Juif" (Sartre 59). Nous ne souhaitons pas nous appesantir davantage sur ce texte, sur lequel Sartre lui-même reviendra ultérieurement. La relation de Serge Doubrovsky à Sartre est en soi un vaste sujet que nous ne pouvons qu'à peine effleurer ici. Néanmoins, nous devons souligner que la démonstration sartrienne s'appuie sur l'idée d'une scène primitive "d'agression" où le jeune juif fait dans la cour d'école l'expérience brutale de son étrangeté, telle que nous l'avons retrouvée dans *La dispersion*:

Plus tardive est la découverte, plus violente est la secousse: tout d'un coup, ils s'aperçoivent que les autres savaient sur eux quelque chose qu'ils ignoraient, qu'on leur appliquait ce qualificatif louche et inquiétant qui n'est pas employé dans leur famille. Ils se sentent séparés, retranchés de la société des enfants normaux qui jouent et qui courrent tranquillement autour d'eux dans la sécurité. . . . Comment veut-on qu'ils ne gardent pas toute leur vie la marque de cette première révélation? (Sartre 91-2)

La figure du Juif, telle qu'elle se dégage de l'analyse sartrienne, demeure liée à celle de l'oppression et de l'aliénation. Le Juif n'ayant pas "désiré" sa judéité et souhaitant à tout prix s'en défaire correspond précisément à la figure du Juif dans *La dispersion*.

Si comme le rappelle Jacques Lecarme le corps demeure le grand absent de l'autobiographie, nous avons pu constater qu'il prend une importance singulière chez Serge Doubrovsky. La blessure antisémite et son doublet la circoncision sont associés au principe même de son entrée en écriture. Car l'écrivain juif, blessé dans sa chair, plus exposé, plus nu, est sans doute plus sujet à l'observation de son corps. Nous n'avons pas évoqué ici les autres formes de problématisation du corps telles que la maladie et l'impuissance pourtant déjà présentes en filigrane et que Régine Robin aborde dans son chapitre consacré à l'homoprothèse (147–151). Profondément dévalorisée, dépréciée, la marque de la filiation juive demeurera inscrite dans les tréfonds de sa mémoire comme une blessure jamais cicatrisée. Elle est à la source d'une entreprise originale de création de soi par l'écriture caractérisée par un puissant désir d'échapper aux déterminations et touche par là à l'essence même de toute littérature.



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BODIES OF KNOWLEDGE IN TWO OLD FRENCH FABLIAUX

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In medieval literature, the Old French fabliaux have the peculiarity to focus primarily on the body. While more courtly texts only allude to the sexual act, declaring that what couples do in their bedchambers as too marvelous to describe, the fabliaux speak openly and often crudely about sex and body parts. Racy descriptions of male and female anatomy abound, and although both are often described in equal detail, the female anatomy seems to cause more confusion, elicits more questions, and requires more interpretation. The female identity resides in that stereotypical gaping orifice: the vagina. The body, and more specifically the vagina, is the ground on which many fabliaux women do battle. It is knowledge of their bodies and desires that allow women to claim a certain degree of independence in the fabliaux. My aim in this paper is to show that two fabliaux women use their sexual bodies to subvert male authority in order to create moments of superiority for themselves. I will use two fabliaux to demonstrate my point, one addressing the position of a single girl, the other a married woman.

In a general study of Old French fabliaux, Marie-Thérèse Lorcin observes that the *dame*, the married women in charge of a household, never has any problem making herself obeyed, no matter what she undertakes. On the other hand, she notes that *la jeune fille* obeys everyone (the nursemaid, her father) and is closely watched by the father's servants (93). She is supposed to be chaste and inexperienced in love, but is this really the case? Is she merely a passive recipient of male discourse or does she par-

ticipate knowingly and actively with her male counterpart? In the fabliau "La Damoisele qui ne pooit oïr parler de foutre," I would like to propose that the young girl knows exactly what she wants and how to get it, bypassing the masculine power play for control over her body.

The daughter of a rich *vilain*, this particular *pucele* cannot bear to hear any vulgarities. The word *foutre* moves her to vomit. The situation is so extreme that the father cannot keep anyone in his service due to the use of offensive language. Every young person but his daughter likes to speak with obscenities. According to the text, "There isn't anyone who doesn't say it sometime and as for young people, in general, they find it to be a nice word" (25–27).¹ So, the word *foutre* is a pleasing word to young people, except to the young lady in the text.

The use of obscenities has been much debated in the study of fabliaux. In his reading of this body of texts, Per Nykrog finds that when a *conteur* has the choice between being vulgar and abstaining, the *conteur* chooses to abstain one out of two times (209). He takes this to mean that the fabliaux are of the *genre courtois*: "On constate que des périphrases courtoises, ou au moins fort decentes, y sont employées bien plus fréquemment que les expressions moins voilées" (209). Similarly for Philippe Ménard, the use of euphemisms is done out of respect for the *bienséances* (147). Furthermore, he adds that this particular tale expresses that "pour la politesse mondaine le mot *foutre* est prohibé" (154). For both Nykrog and Ménard, the avoidance of such language proves the courtliness or the good manners of the fabliaux. R. Howard Bloch refutes this argument by saying that the pleasure lies not in the direct speech or the action but in the

refusal of the proper that characterizes the tales analyzed above: a denaturing. Indeed if there is any pleasure attached to sex in the Old French comic tale . . . such pleasure derives less from the body than from a deferral in speech, of speech, that substitutes for the object or the act. (304)

For Bloch, the erotic of the deflected speech engenders a desire for the narrative itself, and does not allow any room for a histori-

cal or feminist reading of the fabliaux. However intelligent and intriguing Bloch's analysis may be, it displaces the human as the origin for activity. The young girl is offering an alternative model to courtly love that is completely dismissed when Bloch elides the female subjectivity with literary creation.

But let's now return to our text. When a young cleric hears of this girl, he becomes intrigued and goes to her father to ask for employment. The father explains the situation and the two come to an agreement. The father asks if the young man will solemnly promise ("fiancerez") not to speak a word of bad language and he agrees ("ge vos met en covenant"). At this point in the text, the daughter and the young cleric have not met. Yet she is responsible for the young man's presence by stipulating the kind of man whose company she would like to share. One might argue that it is the two men who have come to an agreement on the girl's behalf and therefore she has been left out of the exchange, but we must keep in mind that it is her distaste for the word *foutre* that has intrigued this young man and brought him to the farm. So far, her desire has been met.

When it is time for everyone to go to sleep, the father instructs his daughter to make a bed for their new employee. She responds that her bed is big enough for two, but the young cleric modestly refuses until she finally persuades him. Once again, she, not the man, is the driving force behind the couple's forming.

In bed, he begins to explore her body, asking the names of each part that he passes over. She describes her body as a fountain guarded by two trumpeters in a forest. They then exchange roles and the young man describes his body as a horse guarded by two marshals. She asks the young man if his horse is hungry, to which he replies "no but he is thirsty." She then asks, "Would he like to drink at my fountain if I lead him there?" (210-11). This of course is the end to which the young man was hoping she would guide him. But is this not also the end for which the young girl was hoping as well? I think so. Her modesty has paid off; she found a man who is willing to play the same game as she prescribed. She sets the standard of language, asks him to bed, and finally asks the question to which the whole game has been

heading and for which we have all been waiting: “would your horse like to drink at my fountain?”

To shed a different light on Bloch’s words, the “denaturing” of this fabliau is not the deflected speech, but rather the unusually assertive position of the young girl attracting, initiating and following through with her desire, which is a young man who speaks in a certain manner. As for the courteousness of her actions, they are far less proper than they are abnormal as the text reminds us that everyone likes to hear that vulgar word *foutre*.

For the *pucele*, her sensitivity to the word *foutre* is more properly categorized as a struggle and a desire for control, which she acquires and her courtliness is pure pretense. She has successfully sent away any worker that offended her, forced her father into an agreement with a young man who swears never to use the word, and draws him into her bed where he plays the game of love her way. Evidenced by the final act of the game, her language cannot be a sign of her sense of decency, as Nykrog believes. The young girl uses the language of appropriation against the secular marriage model, choosing her own partner, and against the courtly love model where she is no longer the idealized object of masculine desire. This young girl is not an actor in a man’s play but rather the writer.

Unlike the *pucele*, Lorcin contends, in the earlier quote that I mentioned, that married women have no trouble making themselves obeyed. I, on the other hand, insist that while married women may be obeyed, it is not always such an easy task for them. Often not in happy homes, the wives of the fabliaux look for new lovers or ways of manipulating their husbands. A well studied fabliau “Berengier au long cul” presents an excellent example of a wife who not only outwits her husband but “outmans” him as well which ultimately allows her to jockey for a new position.

An impoverished lord gives his daughter in marriage to a rich *vilain* and has diminished the honor of the lineage: “Thus the good lineage has been debased” (24). The husband is lazy and prefers tarts and custards to chivalric duties. His wife constantly reminds him of the nobility of her lineage. After much arguing, the knight finally declares that he could beat in combat

anyone from her lineage or anyone else. The next day he dresses for battle in full armor and rides off into the woods to seek his enemies. The knight has no intention of fighting anyone but cannot go home unless it appears that he has. To achieve this appearance, he takes off his armor and beats it with his sword and returns home giving the impression that he has been in many battles. He does this for several days when the wife notices that neither he nor his horse appear any worse for the wear while the armor is practically destroyed. The next day she follows him dressed in armor and is horrified at the sight of her cowardly husband. Her disguise provides her with the anonymity she needs but more importantly sets her in what is considered the male domain of knighthood. She wears a suit of armor and must act accordingly to the stereotype in order to be convincing. Conversely, the husband disgraces the very suit and position he pretends to uphold.

The wife decides to confront him as the lord of the woods and demands that he repay the damage done to the trees and for cutting the wood. She gives him two choices: hand to hand combat or kissing the knight's anus. The husband opts for the second. The knight descends from the horse and displays her anus to be kissed, the sight of which provokes the following response in her husband: "And he looked at the crevice *du con au cul*: it seemed to him that they went together" (242–44). Her husband marvels at the large orifice, not realizing that he is looking at a woman and not a man, and thinks that he has never seen such a large anus in his life. Nevertheless he kisses it anyway. When he asks the knight her name, she responds: "My name is Berengier of the Long Ass who shames all cowards" (258–59).

The association of one's identity to a defining characteristic is not an uncommon element in medieval literature. Chrétien de Troyes' Yvain, who having lost his identity, rides around the countryside in search of an *aventure* in the hopes to re-establish his identity. His new identity becomes associated with the lion that accompanies him and henceforth he is called *le chevalier au lion*. The wife plays upon this convention to create a fictitious and erroneous identity, the meaning of which is all-powerful in the mind of the husband.

Upon identifying herself as *Berengier au long cul*, she hurries home and invites her lover to join her. When the husband returns and finds them in bed together, he is outraged and says that she will pay with her teeth. She tells him to be quiet or she will call *Berengier au long cul* to avenge her and shame him.

Simultaneously, the role reversal upsets one order and corrects another. The wife challenges the authority of her husband while re-establishing herself as the truly noble partner in the marriage. Lesley Johnson takes this a step further when she remarks: “The wife’s professional victory over her husband—meeting him man to man—provides her with a license to overturn his authority in the domestic sphere too” (304). This defeat for the husband is clearly a loss of empowerment. Lesley Johnson simply sees the loss of power on the battlefield and in the home as a gain in sexual politics. E. Jane Burns considers this loss as a husband’s inability to cast a castrating gaze upon his wife. The fact that the husband sees the vagina and doesn’t recognize it has disarmed him, as Burns notes: “His gaze, now powerless to define the woman’s sexuality as an inferior copy of his own, can only listen to words issuing from her newly authoritative head” (42–43).

E. Jane Burns understands the victory as recognition of sexual difference whereas Lesley Johnson sums it up as female superiority. Clearly both women are correct, but I would like to insist upon the position of authority and its articulation. The name *Berengier au long cul* is synonymous with power and victory and a simple invocation of the name strikes fear in the husband because he understands this association. Although the name is derived from a misconception of the sexual organs and the husband’s inability to recognize them properly, Burns uses this misconception to underline the stupidity of the man and not the ingenuity of the woman. The wife seized the opportunity to create a fiction for her husband to read by inventing a name. The wife’s agency derives from her ability to create the conditions for writing, which is to say, naming herself as victor.

This once powerless woman is acting as her own champion in the sexual battlefield, asserting not only her sexuality but also her authority. The gender norms that she is attempting to displace

are the very same ones that empower her to do so. The wife above asserts her subjectivity, not simply by "being" a subject, but rather by virtue of having gone through a process of assuming a sex. Paradoxically, here the sex she has assumed would appear to be masculine as a knight normally is. Yet, she has established herself not as "woman" or "man" but as *Berengier au long cul*, the superior partner in the marriage relationship. She accomplishes this through a well-known convention of the courtly self-identification and creates a fiction that is believable. The parody of the courtly self-identification does not foreclose the possibility of agency because she is not a man, rather the reiteration of this constitutive norm acts as an enabling factor to power and conversely as an opposition to power as well.

Clearly in both the cases I have cited, these two women have used their bodies knowingly and intelligently to place themselves in the position that they sought. One's weapon was what appeared to be a denial of the sexual act; the other's was her husband's misconception of the female body. One created a tale of *pudeur* that successfully drew a lover to her who played the game of love her way. The other reclaimed her position, through a false identity, as the more noble marriage partner. Both, however, created scenes to be read and interpreted by their male counterparts. Thus these women found a voice through their bodies of knowledge.



Notes

¹ All English quotations of the fabliaux are my own. They are based on volume 4 of the edition of Willem Noomen and Nico van den Boogaard.

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ESPRITS ANIMAUX OU ESPRIT BÊTE TOUT COURT?

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Ainsi parlait Valéry dans son article intitulé “La crise de l'esprit”: “dans l'ordre de la connaissance précise, l'Europe pèse encore aujourd’hui beaucoup plus que le reste du globe. Je me trompe, ce n'est pas l'Europe qui l'emporte, c'est l'Esprit Européen dont l'Amérique est une création formidable” (*Variété* 49). Fichtre! *Esprit Européen*, allitération visuelle donc savante de la majuscule capitale!¹ Création formidable! *Forme*, corps donc créé de toute pièce, sur un globe prégnant de connaissance et de naissance! Un siècle plus tôt, toujours à propos de cet esprit “synecdochique”—l'Europe lettrée étant l'une des parties du grand Tout spirituel (et temporel) que représentait alors la France—c'était Chateaubriand qui claironnait en fin de paragraphe, lors de son voyage en Amérique, que la France était “la nation la plus intelligente, la plus brave, la plus brillante de la terre” (276). Cette brillance, dans la langue artiste du dix-neuvième siècle, c'est, on le sait, l'esprit même de l'art, l'une des expressions les plus accomplies de la vertu essentiellement civilisatrice européenne: lustre et vernis posés sur le réel chez Baudelaire, prisme merveilleux à amuser les yeux ou spectacle brillant avec Chateaubriand, affirmation totale du génie *sui generis* européen, de sa culture et de l'infinie finition verbale tout au moins de ses créations.

Quoiqu'un tantinet ringardes pour le lecteur de cette fin de siècle, et carrément risibles pour les étrangers, les déclarations de ces spécimens de *l'Homo Europaeus* que furent Valéry et Chateaubriand (Messieurs Teste par excellence, représentants du *classicus* intellectuel, de l'esprit donc, aux antipodes du *proleta-*

rius, de ce qui est manuel, le corps ou la main d'œuvre), n'en laissent pas moins rêveur. D'où la rêverie problématique suivante: et si l'Amérique représentait le corps, la forme créée, l'ordre visuel et visible, l'épiphénomène et le *Pharmakon* (les fils, la réplique, l'Imaginaire féminin) et l'Europe, l'esprit, l'ordre invisible et phénoménal (le Père, l'origine, le Saint-Esprit, le Symbolique, Socrate).² Mais que diable . . . !

Ce que j'essaierai de montrer ici, schématiquement, c'est que l'histoire de la France, de l'esprit européen, ce que Descartes nomma "histoire de l'esprit" tout court, commence à l'époque de Montaigne, lors des grandes découvertes et explorations: Nouveaux Mondes, corps célestes, cosmiques ou terrestres, et aussi anatomiques, corps humain, en pleine coïncidence avec la découverte de la langue, organe total, hostie d'une nouvelle religion. En France, l'on dévore soudain la langue française, et d'emblée, le concept de langue se laïcise, s'affranchit du latin d'église et se substitue quasiment à l'âme si j'ose dire. Cette découverte occasionne une expérience particulière de transsubstantiation de la langue comme expression de l'esprit, du bel esprit, d'une mondanité, niveau second et intellectualisé du concept de Monde, et aussi et surtout, comme organe même de l'oralité, sa glande pinéale pour ainsi dire. L'Amérique muette alors ne peut être conçue que comme corps physique, pâle copie de l'Europe, repoussoir menant au capitalisme, à l'exploitation du corps, une création/créature que l'on vendit jadis à vil prix d'ailleurs. Logiquement, de cette découverte du monde et de la mondanité, naîtront les concepts modernes d'universalisation (mot français) et de globalisation (mot américain) qui orientent précisément vers une conception différente de l'économie entretenu entre le corps et l'esprit, et qui informent les choix politiques actuels.

Soit ce qui est littéral et ce qui est figuré donc. Soit ce qui est fini (le corps) et ce qui est infini (l'esprit). Chateaubriand, à la quête de son désir et d'un vocable pour "peindre tout cela" (129),³ ne trouvant pas l'infini qu'il cherchait dans ce qu'il proféra dans un cri plutôt qu'une parole "l'Amérique!" (268)⁴ lorsqu'il en aperçut le littoral, se créa une sorte de mission littérale pour épuiser cet infini, cela, en se faisant explorateur aussitôt qu'il arriva sur le sol américain. Après qu'une jeune

esclave l'introduisit sur la terre américaine, comme il le note ironiquement, l'ironie étant le sceau même de l'homme d'esprit depuis Socrate, ce qu'il chercherait dorénavant serait le détroit de Béring⁵: corps vierge et littéral, initialement vision d'un littoral pour le navigateur danois Béring qui le baptisa de son nom, tout comme l'Amérique qui est nommée à partir du nom d'un mâle navigateur européen, sans doute brillant, brave et intelligent, Amerigo Vespucci. Dieu, l'esprit, nomment, peignent, créent irrévocablement.

“Ce fut une esclave qui me reçut sur la terre de la liberté” (269), prononce alors Chateaubriand, rappelant aussi et sempiternellement que l'infini échappe au réel. Or cet infini est féminin et n'est susceptible d'être trouvé qu'ailleurs, dans cet *aliore loco* qu'était et reste l'Amérique non pas blanche mais indigène ou noire dans l'imaginaire européen. Les noms que l'on donna alors furent des noms féminins éclos directement de ce corps vierge, *no man's land* à capturer: Atala, sylphide, génie de la nature, *America*. Le passage de l'infini au fini, des fleurs au mal (au réel, monde du mâle blanc) dont Baudelaire traduit parfaitement la tension dans son poème intitulé “Le Voyage” (“berçant notre infini sur le fini des mers” (167), des mers ou des Pères, serait-on tenté de lui substituer) est à l'origine, semble-t-il, de cette création européenne qu'est l'Amérique selon Valéry. L'infini (l'esprit, l'âme, la puissance du désir) s'échoue littéralement sur le littoral du réel dans une impuissance totale. L'ordre physique auquel appartient l'Amérique, la nature qui la définit, son *anima*, âme, n'existe que s'il est consacré par une métaphysique, une culture, *cultura animi*, que s'il est initialement baptisé par la semence ichoreuse des Dieux pourvus d'un nom irremplaçable, et partant d'une langue, celle du Père/Créateur/écrivain: Béring, Amerigo, Chateaubriand, génies porteurs des gènes de cet esprit européen.

Que l'Europe soit l'esprit surpuissant et l'Amérique seulement le corps impuissant, est bien ce que sous-entendent aussi des auteurs et critiques de l'an 2000 tels que Fumaroli, Kristeva, Derrida dans leurs essais les plus récents de cette fin de siècle, cela, fidèles héritiers qu'ils sont de l'Esprit *made in France*, et aussi et bien sûr, “dernier défenseur et illustrateur de la langue

française" (Derrida 79). Curieusement, notons-le, cet esprit à *la française*, se voit ultimement défendu par des étrangers: Derrida né en Algérie, Fumaroli d'origine italienne, Kristeva bulgare, et bon nombre d'auteurs produisant ce qui entre dans la catégorie officielle de "littérature francophone" viennent d'ailleurs, utilisateurs d'une langue défendue, et qu'ils défendent, martyrs victimes d'une passion pour la langue française, pour ses imparfaits du subjonctif si parfaits, et je dirais même plus, fidèle aux *idémistes* de la pension Vauquer et de Tintin: plus que parfaits! L'esprit est lié à un phénomène de langue, plutôt que de localisation strictement spatiale. En termes derridiens, l'on pourrait dire: "je n'ai qu'une seule langue, ce n'est pas la mienne" (42). Si on peut l'expliquer ainsi, l'esprit est un lieu commun qui ne dépend pas des latitudes ni des longitudes, mais de ce que Lacan aurait pu tout aussi bien nommer *lalalalangue*: l'organe physique et l'esprit de la langue, l'articulation même du désir pour la langue, un savoir qui se connaît sans se connaître, impliquant un *en soi* de la transmission totale du savoir, ce que Valéry nommait bien avant Lacan un "ordre de la connaissance" (49). Or, le problème, ce qui choque peut être, est que cette réalisation s'est faite en France, en langue française, légitimant la prétention française et exclusive à l'esprit.

Originellement, ce fut le phénomène de langage qui détermina plus tard le phénomène de langue ou vice versa. Montaigne, dans sa *lalangue* franchement et franchouillardement *française*, libérée de sa latinité, régénérée par l'accueil tous azimuts des langues venues de tous les horizons, des provinces, des corps de métier, de l'antiquité même, ne suggérait-il pas au long de ses *Essais*, et plus particulièrement dans "De la conversation," que l'art tout oral de la conversation était comme le vin et l'amour, le festin de l'esprit d'Homère en quelque sorte? Cette oralité se voit aussi célébrée dans les premiers mots avant-garde de la première scène de *Don Juan* de Molière: Sganarelle y vante les vertus du tabac, de ce qui se chique ou se fume avec la bouche, volutes et émanations de l'esprit même. Cette célébration quasi religieuse est forme métaphorisée d'une sociabilité conviviale dilatée et parachevée par la forme théâtrale, orale donc, qui la consacre ici. Cette oralité de la pipe, transposée dans

les genres oraux spécifiquement français que furent les Traités, les Discours, les Mémoires, Confessions, Essais ou dans un thème traditionnel d'inspiration artistique (pipe de Saint-Amant, de Baudelaire ou de Max Ernst, Gauloise de Léo Ferré) se survit à elle-même dans l'œuvre fondamentalement orale de Lacan par exemple. Que ce dernier ait vécu du discours improvisé, des Séminaires plutôt que de l'écriture préméditée, et qu'à la fin, seules les *monstrations* ne lui semblaient aptes à proférer et transmettre l'absolue vérité, prouve paradoxalement que cette vérité était contenue dans la vertu contagieuse *sui generis* de *lalalangue*, l'esprit même de la langue française, sa musicalité si enviée donnant le "la" à *lalalangue*.⁶ Lacan parlant le Désir, se situait, fidèlement, dans le sillage direct du *Traité des passions de l'âme* de Descartes, là où tout, tout du moins en français, se formula magiquement: les nœuds borroméens lacaniens étaient déjà tous contenus dans les formules cartésiennes nouant le désir, dans la configuration de l'esprit et du corps qui s'y développèrent.

Il faut relire de près Descartes et voir comment se fondèrent ces catégories toutes verbales (l'esprit, le corps, le désir, l'âme et la *glande*, forme quasi anagrammée de *langue*) dont nous tressons nos gloses à l'orée du vingt et unième siècle⁷: "Enfin je remarque cela de particulier dans le désir qu'il agite le cœur plus violemment qu'aucunes des autres passions et fournit au cerveau plus d'esprits" (*Passions de l'âme* 161) ou "Pour le désir, il est évident que, lorsqu'il procède d'une vraie connaissance" (185); s'agirait-il ici d'un désir à l'origine de la connaissance supposément précise dont parlait Valéry? "Et ce n'est que cette action du visage, avec cette voix inarticulée et éclatante, qu'on nomme le rire" (174). Rire, désir, passions et esprits insolitement pluriels: quelle langue Descartes parle-t-il? Furetière, définissant le mot "passion" dans son *Dictionnaire*, commence par "passion en morale se dit . . ." et finit par renvoyer à Descartes: "Voyez surtout M. Descartes qui a fait un beau traité des *Passions* d'une manière physique." S'agit-il du *Beau* traité ou du Traité beau? S'agit-il de moralE, de moral ou de physique, de corps ou d'esprit, ou d'esprit sur le corps . . .? Ce qui ressort de tout cela, c'est le désir de discourir, gratuit, hors circuit: l'esprit mâle fondateur (*animus*), l'Imaginaire féminin, le *pharmakon* (*anima*),

enfin le désir né de et dans la glande pinéale comme on le verra bien plus bas!

Ce n'est pas un hasard si Descartes utilise la langue française et le "je" de l'homme d'esprit pour créer ce roman baroque ou épique du corps et de l'esprit que sont le *Discours de la méthode*, son *Traité du fœtus* ou son *Traité de l'homme*⁸—ceci parce que la découverte de *la lalangue* coïncide avec celle de la glande et celle du corps. Là, nous apprenons comment la matrice irriguée de sang chargé d'*esprits animaux* qui alimentent le cœur, organe central de la tragédie chronique du théâtre de son époque, se voit propulsée vers le cortex pour se distiller en Esprit à partir de la même agitation que celle qui fut à l'origine du *cogito*—mot magique chez Descartes, mot politique chez les Frondeurs de la même époque, mémorialistes utilisant le *je* aussi.

Pour que le Sujet pensât, il avait fallu passer par tout un imaginaire impliquant les sens, le sens, le sang—le "bon sens" étant "la chose la mieux partagée du monde" (33) comme le rappelle Descartes dans la première phrase de son *Discours de la Méthode* où le "la" est donné à cette langue française si choyée. Dans cette géographie du corps, dont le pendant serait celle du Cœur avec la Carte du Tendre, la langue, extension de la pensée, maniant le souffle de l'Esprit, doit assister à sa propre naissance. Le *Cogito* apparaît l'espace d'une (co)agitation, mais c'est sa traduction française qui en est expulsée soudain triomphalement, ornée qu'elle est d'un *je* magistral, rebondissant dans un autre *je*: "Je pense donc *je suis*," sujet phénoménal et insistant, localisant l'être dans le *lieu* le plus altier du corps—la tête, la pensée, et la langue française. Toute cette opération se fait à partir de la langue: lieu commun réunissant le corps et l'esprit, la littéralité et la figurativité (la figure/la tête).

Donc, il y aurait le cœur, et plus haut, dans ce monde dans le monde qu'est le corps humain, la *teste*, les esprits autour de la glande pinéale où réside l'âme, selon Descartes, organe sensible de l'esprit difficilement localisable, réduit à une glande/un gland, une langue, *lalangue*, les langues, les glandes. Descartes écartait bien entendu l'animal, réduit aux *esprits animaux*. L'animal, c'est l'être vivant certes, mais ignoble, c'est-à-dire sans nom, sans identité, et surtout, sans langage ou langue. Dans l'antiquité,

c'est le barbare, archétype même de l'étranger qui parle une anti-langue. Replacée dans le contexte de l'époque qui la vit naître, la question sur l'existence de l'âme chez les animaux telle qu'elle fut posée par Gassendi, La Fontaine ou Descartes, était névralgique. Le barbare pour l'Européen, c'est la bête territoriale, c'est l'Américain, l'homme sans littérature ni langage: le premier colon, le vilain petit canard qui fût devenu cygne s'il était resté, ou mieux, revenu en Europe.⁹

Cette barbarie a pour nom *pop culture* ou "une certaine complaisance américaine envers la bêtise" (Kristeva 391), la globalisation, le corps patrimonial traité comme un capital commercialisable et remplaçable, un capitalisme *made in USA* fondé sur le capital, le cheptel, la société du show-biz et des petits chefs. Kristeva n'hésite pas à employer le mot extrême de *bêtise* à propos des Américains: bêtise, c'est-à-dire, ce qui appartient à la bête, au corps sans esprit.

N'est-il pas intéressant en soi que du côté européen l'on parle d'*universalisation* et de l'autre côté de l'Atlantique, dans ce que Lacan appelle "l'au-delà de l'eau" (20), de *globalisation*? Encore une fois, le choix de termes comme *univers*, *cosmos*, *monde*, *terre* ou *globe* mériterait un développement surtout dès Galileo pour qui la Terre tourne, et surtout aussi dès Descartes pour qui la tête tourne, s'agitte avec le *cogito*, agitant aussi les beaux esprits et mondains du temps. Disons seulement que le mot *globe* qui informe indirectement notre sujet, apparaît avec la montée bourgeoise et matérialiste à l'époque médiévale, signifiant initialement un rouleau de draperie. C'est le dix-huitième siècle mécréant qui le substituera au mot *monde* lui donnant son sens actuel de globe terrestre. Ainsi pour Voltaire, écrivain se frottant à ses heures à ce que l'on appellera plus tard "l'esprit d'entreprise," à la tête qu'il fut de la première fabrique de bas de soie au monde, la terre, c'était le *globe* laïc du grand horloger. Dernier écrivain heureux selon Barthes parce qu'il allait dans le sens de l'histoire et de ses mythes, le progrès par exemple ou la science, Voltaire, champion de l'esprit, lançait ce mot, *globe*, dans le bowling d'un monde où les hommes deviennent des quilles, sans queue ni tête, remplaçables, décimables, maillons de la *mécanique* des Lumières, devenir même du capitalisme, puis

de la *globalisation*, un nouveau style réduisant l'être à un corps, à une bête: une mécanique!

Dans cet ordre d'idées, Kristeva, se révoltant sans doute contre l'Article 17 de la Déclaration des droits de l'homme, la Propriété y étant définie comme "inalienable and sacrée," explique la grande différence qui existe entre *Pop Culture*, bête, mécanique et ignoble culture du corps, et la *Culture populaire*, noble, descendante de la Commune révolutionnaire, du Communisme, succédané du christianisme des premières heures, à l'origine du Communisme, culture de l'esprit inalienable et sacré.

Descendant direct de cette vision, Baudrillard, *bel esprit*, hypostase de Dieu le Père européen, recrée l'Amérique à sa façon. Son Amérique est une sorte d'Eve recréée d'une côte de la France, côté d'Adam. Réduisant l'Amérique à un simulacre, une hyperréalité, une sorte de mécanique sans esprit, une société du spectacle faites de signes visibles, vides, sans signifié ni âme, Baudrillard procède un peu comme Valéry ou Fumaroli et les anciens colonisateurs soudain colonisés. Dans le langage essentieliste qui caractérise leur discours, Disneyland et Las Vegas sont perçus comme des lieux (sans *animus* ni *anima*), purs signifiants, impuissants, sans glande pineale, sans tête ni queue!

Toutefois, dans cette espèce de caricature *tarte à la crème* des Etats-Unis, ce que l'on oublie, c'est que le simulacre, la société du spectacle sont nés en Europe même, à Versailles notamment, où s'amorça une société du divertissement tout visuel et gratuit, entièrement constituée de signes extérieurs visibles: prolifération et création de jeux de cartes et de fortune, ronds de jambes du roi dans les ballets et les caracoles, en bref, vide chiffré, mise en avant du corps et domestication de l'esprit fait sur mesure, l'esprit au carré: le fameux carré de Versailles justement. . . . Et puis, Versailles démocratisé, passé au tamis de la Révolution française, c'est Las Vegas ou . . . le Louvre pyramidé: le palais jadis des monarques reconçu en énorme machine à sous et pourvu d'une cafétéria, du pain et des cirques, du pain dans un cirque! Les Européens ont maille à partir avec l'Amérique, vue comme ère/aire de la littéralité (objet créé, création, empire des choses et des corps) dont l'Europe serait le créateur, l'âme, le

génie . . . Le ver(s) était en fait dans le fruit, l'Europe, car l'Europe, c'est l'Amérique et vice versa, vice versa ça!

Résumons ce survol de quatre siècles et de deux continents. Tout commença donc vers le seizième siècle, bien avant Descartes et tout finit peut-être avec Lacan. La langue de Rabelais fut, elle aussi, méritoire: langue fantasmagorique, polyglotte, touchant à tout et prise d'un appétit gigantel et métaphorique fondant le corps dans l'esprit; elle introduisait toute une oralité discursive, une heteroglossia chronique. Elle surgit jadis lorsque le monde—concept réapparaissant trois cent quatre-vingt fois dans les *Essais* de Montaigne selon Fumaroli (341)—prenant le relais du cosmos antique, se libéra de son suaire ptolémaïque. Parler du monde, puis, par glissement, devenir mondain, *non cum spiritu tuo*, coïncidait alors avec l'ère de l'exploration de Nouveaux Territoires, le dévoilement de Nouveaux Mondes, de nouveaux corps célestes ou terrestres. L'Amérique, America féminisée venant du mâle Amérigo, Amériques plurielles, se virent dessinées par les cartographes avec une taille fille, de larges hanches. Toute une étude ne reste-t-elle pas à faire sur l'évolution dans la représentation cartographique, prétendument objective de la science depuis le début des grandes découvertes de continents ou de terres neuves, entreprise par les rêveurs solitaires que furent les grands navigateurs? Le beau monde, puis le concept de mode qui lui est organiquement lié, l'Esprit dans sa forme la plus laïque, naquirent alors dans une société lettrée partageant une sémantique commune et sélecte, inventant une nouvelle barbarie, l'Amérique, un repoussoir, le noble ayant besoin de l'ignoble pour subsister.

Cette vision dichotomique est nuancée par des œuvres comme celles de Nerval ou de Sartre. "Respecte dans la bête un esprit agissant" dit Nerval; ou encore "Homme, libre-penseur, te crois-tu seul pensant?" (111), questionne-t-il si justement, remaniant à sa façon le *cogito*, et les concepts de corps et d'esprit. Il est aussi intéressant que Sartre dans *La Nausée*, réfléchissant le *cogito cartésien*, ironisant mondainement ainsi en disant "je suis, j'existe, je pense donc je ballotte, je suis" (146), n'ait accordé aucune vertu ni à l'esprit, ni au langage qui, au contraire, suscite la nausée la plus totale et irrévocable. Logiquement, Roquentin,

vieux roquentin héros de *La Nausée* de Sartre ne pouvait trouver de Rédemption que dans les choses, ou dans la musique, non pas la musique classique européenne, mais dans le jazz chanté par une nègresse américaine, descendante, qui sait, de la jeune esclave noire qui avait accueilli Chateaubriand en Amérique deux siècles plus tôt. Or le Jazz, c'est la semence, l'âme de la glande pinéale de Descartes, le point de rencontre et d'origine du corps et de l'esprit, non?

Lacan interrogé sur les premiers exploits des cosmonautes aurait affirmé que les cosmonautes n'existaient pas dans la mesure où le cosmos n'existe plus depuis la révolution copernicienne. Et l'Amérique? Dans ce contexte là, elle n'existerait pas non plus: telle que la pense l'Europe, lieu de l'esprit et des lettres (Europa était sœur de Cadmus, légateur d'un alphabet en Grèce), elle est un corps, sans littérature, peuplé de bêtes, des esprits animaux non encore distillés par le cortex, une mécanique. Le mot de Kristeva dans *Sens et non-sens de la révolte* est très fort et significatif: dire que les Américains ont une tolérance pour la bêtise, c'est soit faire du mauvais esprit sur les *animal rights*, soit se remettre dans une sémantique toute cartésienne et ses distinguos, et c'est alors s'accrocher à un passé qui n'existe plus, c'est vivre dans un espace ptoléméen, c'est refaire bêtement le procès de Galileo!



Notes

¹ Ce redoublement intempestif de la majuscule (Esprit Européen) n'est pas si anodin. En vérité, il saisit l'esprit de la lettre, son essence même. En évacuant la forme adjectivale, il nominalise, capitalise, et partant, nie l'inessentiel d'une logique toute grammaticale apparaissant soudain comme une erreur de passage, cela pour réaffirmer plus magistralement la maîtrise d'une connaissance totale et intraitable.

² Si l'on considère le modèle derridien dont on s'est manifestement inspiré ici, l'on pourrait aussi gloser sur la nominalisation des pays (le fait par exemple que le Canada s'appelait originellement la Nouvelle France). Dans l'esprit européen, l'Amérique est une doublure, une copie non originale, un nom du Père donnée au fils en fonction du Saint-Esprit. Jules Verne ne dit-il pas dans l'un de ses romans moins fictifs qu'on ne pense: "Qui dit Canadien, dit Français" (31)?

³ "Tu devrais peindre tout cela" dit Lucile à Chateaubriand, son frère. C'est précisément de cette peinture (de la recherche d'une palette verbale idéale, constituée de mots mis pour les choses et finalement de l'abstraction emblématique de l'art) dont il s'agit pour l'Européen/Créateur.

⁴ Très belle phrase de Chateaubriand qui, citée intégralement, mime la naissance, les premiers battements de cœur, la connaissance et la non moins importante instance sur le féminin qui donne, pour ainsi dire, le "la" à cette scène capitale de dévoilement des mots: "Le cœur me batit quand le capitaine me la montra: l'Amérique!" (268). "L'Amérique," parole non-parole, (le "a" de Amérique serait-il un "a" privatif?), cri, pur signifiant, disant à sa façon que l'on ne trouvera pas d'écriture ou de langage en Amérique—ce qui corroborait les remarques sur l'extinction des langues locales et proprement indigènes, pendant son séjour. Chateaubriand s'exclame "Amérique!" comme l'on s'exclamait "Foutre!" dans certains contes médiévaux.

⁵ Vitus Bering, navigateur danois, découvrit le détroit portant son nom, au dix-huitième siècle.

⁶ La plupart des *Ecrits* de Lacan furent mis en page soit avec la collaboration intense de son éditeur, soit avec la participation de son beau-fils. Conçu ainsi, l'art lacanien serait un art de l'éloquence orale dans la plus pure tradition française.

⁷ Les parties du *Traité des Passions de l'âme* ont des titres révélateurs et suggestifs tels que: "Du désir," "Du désir, de la joie et de la tristesse" and "Du rire."

⁸ Descartes passe triomphalement du *cogito ergo sum* à sa traduction française qui met les pleins feux sur le pronom personnel absent dans la première version en latin. Dire *je* fut un dévoilement et une jouissance sans doute aussi puissants que de parler de soi pour Rousseau. Il est intéressant de voir comment certains auteurs du dix-septième siècle sont passés du latin au français, et quel joug aussi représentait le latin par rapport à la langue maternelle et patrimoniale.

⁹ Montaigne, dans "Des Coches," articule l'idée selon laquelle le Barbare est en fait le lettré indigène en Amérique (l'Indien) tandis que le colon est le déchet européen.

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Le Corps et L'Esprit

in French Cultural Production

UCLA French Graduate Students'
Fourth Annual Interdisciplinary Conference

April 16–18, 1999

Friday, April 16, 1999

Covel Commons at Sunset Village, UCLA; South Bay Room

5:00 p.m. Weclome

Vanessa Herold, Conference Chair

Introduction of Keynote Speaker

Patrick Coleman, UCLA Department of French

Keynote Address

Toril Moi, Duke University

Literature and Romance Studies

**“I am a Woman”: The Body as Background
in *The Second Sex***

Respondents

Lynn Hunt, UCLA Department of History

Malina Stefanovska, UCLA Department of French

7:15 p.m. Reception

Saturday, April 17, 1999

South Bay Room

8:30 a.m. Breakfast for participants and guests

Panel #1

9:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.

Body, Society, and Law

Moderator: Sheila Espineli

1. “The Devil in Drag: Moral Injunction or Social Leaven?”
Catherine Boon (University of Pennsylvania, Department of Comparative Literature and Literary Theory)
2. “Ethics Beyond the Body: Descartes and Heidegger in Emmanuel Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity*”
Ethan Kleinberg (UCLA, Department of History)
3. “Comment dit-on ‘queer’ en français?”
Scott Gunther (New York University, Institute of French Studies)

Panel #2

10:45 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.

The Exotic, the Exsanguine, and the Erotomatic Body

Moderator: Julie Masi

1. “Harem Girls And Turkish Baths: An Armchair Traveller’s Colonial Desire”
Holly Woodson Waddell (Northwestern University, Department of French)
2. “Incarnating Decadence: Reading Des Esseintes’s Bodies”
Wanda Klee (Marburg University, Department of English)
3. “Le corps manqué du surréalisme: Barthes et Breton”
Celina Thompson (New York University, Department of French)

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